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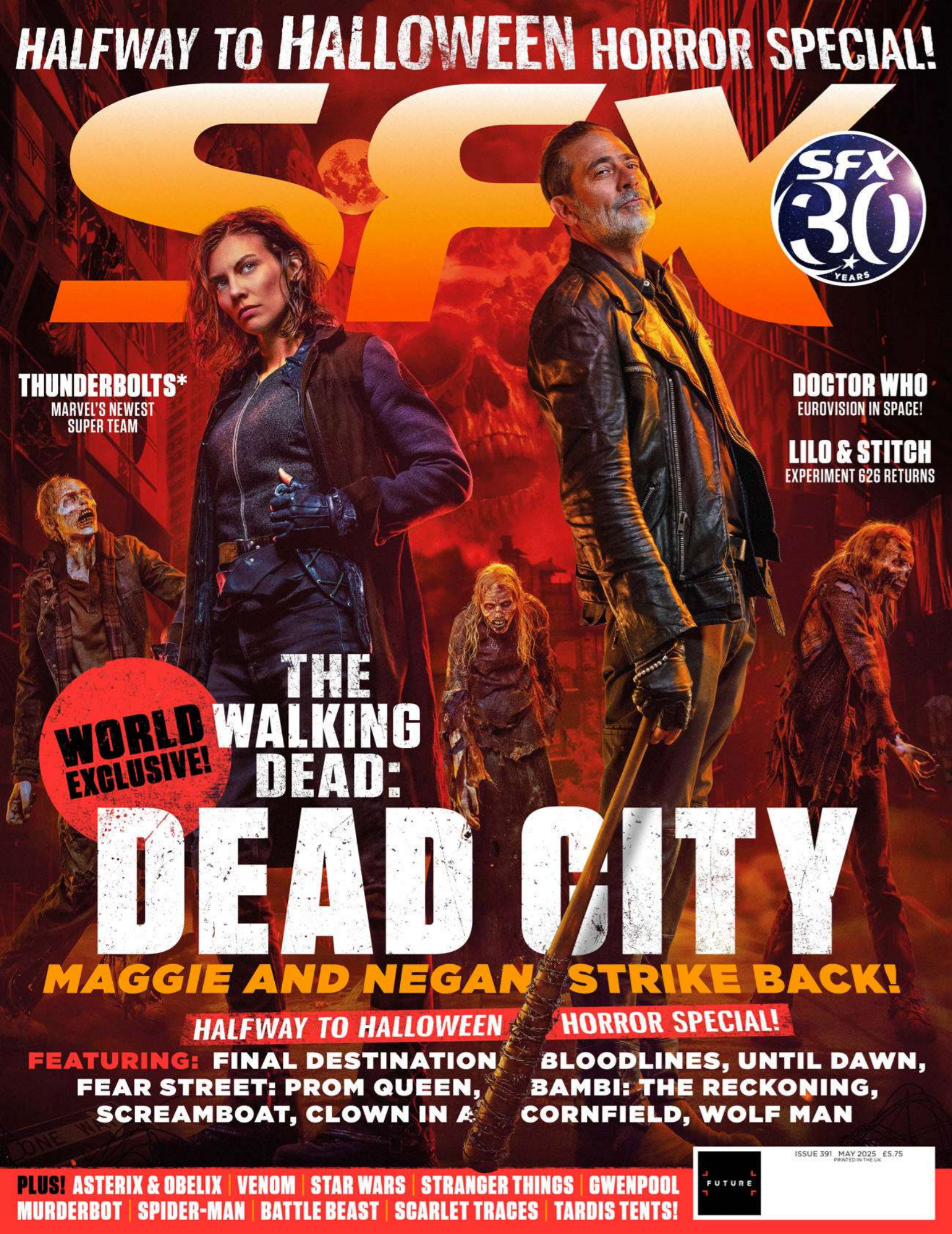

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

THE WALKING DEAD: DEAD CITY

MAGGIE AND NEGAN STRIKE BACK!

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Oh deer oh deer...

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It's basically a documentary at this point.

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Joe Abercrombie goes through Hell – for your pleasure.

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We get our claws into this one.

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Novelist Emma Newman on *The Vengeance*.

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96 BLASTERMIND
A deadly quizosaurus roars into view. Hide!

98 TOTAL RECALL
The TARDIS Playhouse rematerialises.

Captain's Log

Sometimes it does feel like I have the clock from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* ticking down in my brain – one day closer to Halloween!

"Do what brings you joy" is a mantra I embrace more and more these days and spooky season is, without a doubt, my favourite time of the year. And the best thing about it? It can literally start whenever you want it to! So while shops might start stocking Halloween goodies from June – no, it's not too early, before you say anything – we can officially mark the halfway to Halloween point from the end of April.

What better excuse to dip into some of the horrors coming our way in the coming weeks? From returning franchises, to new adaptations of books and redesigning a Universal Monster classic, you'll find them in these pages – if you dare! Now, if I can just get through another miserably hot summer...

But don't worry if horror's not your thing, there's loads of other exclusive new interviews and even a trip to an Interstellar Song Contest – yes, another favourite time of year for yours truly.

Now, a personal plea! If you like what we've been doing, please do consider taking out a subscription – we have lots of very special issues coming up so you'll be saving even more than the prices on page 17. Plus you'll be helping to keep *SFX* alive past our 30th anniversary year (and me off the streets for another Halloween).

See you in four weeks!

Darren x

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Been catching up with *Gremlins: The Wild Batch*. Hope we get another season.

→ Absolutely loving *Yellowjackets* this season – those cliffhangers are *intense*.

RANTS

→ Why is *Scream: The TV Series* not available to buy on disc or to stream in the UK?

→ People really need to get some perspective about television shows and films and stop the online pile-ons. We've got one life, don't waste it.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Very much enjoyed David Tennant interviewing Russell T Davies on his podcast (bit.ly/tennantdavies). Y'know, he could make a good journalist...

→ Rewatched Tom Baker's *This Is Your Life*, thanks to BBC Four (it's now on iPlayer). I confess that I got a lump in my throat when Elisabeth Sladen walked out.

→ Perversely excited about Eureka's *Strange New Worlds* box set of four East German sci-fi films (due out on 19 May), despite the fact that none of them has an IMDb rating higher than 5.6.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Thought *O'Dessa* was so much fun! If John Waters had directed *Mad Max* that's what I imagine it would have looked like.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ Cautiously optimistic about Amy Pascal and David Heyman taking control of Bond. I loved the Daniel Craig films but we need proper escapism now. Bring back the hollow volcano of it all!

→ Writing about *Asterix* this issue sent me back to the original. I'd almost forgotten just how much I loved those books! The names alone... Genius.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ As miraculous as Wile E Coyote surviving every one of his canyon falls, *Coyote vs Acme* getting saved from a corporate tax accounting death by Ketchup Entertainment is a big win for animation and its fans. Can't wait to see it in 2026.

→ Glad John Boyega was *very* candid about calling out *Star Wars* fans who only want white, male heroes and execs who have terrible blinders about protecting their POC actors.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

MAY 2025

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KILLING MACHINE

The Martha Wells novel comes to sentient life in *Murderbot*

Highlights

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PREDATOR VS SPIDER-MAN

→ When we say it's a face-off between alien and bug-man, we literally mean it.

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STAR WARS

→ Marvel Comics head into uncharted territory, bridging the gap following *Return Of The Jedi*.

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BATTLE BEAST

→ Robert Kirkman and Ryan Ottley's new comic book series puts the cat among the pigeons.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Ctrl+Alt+Defeat!

Chris and Paul Weitz reunite to adapt Martha Wells's much-loved *The Murderbot Diaries* into sci-fi series **Murderbot** for Apple TV+

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

THE FIRST REFERENCE TO A "robot" in literature came in 1920 when Czech playwright Karel Capek coined the term in his drama *RUR* to describe artificial workers that eventually overthrow their human creators. Over a hundred years later, there have been countless iterations of robots in books, films and television series, usually either protecting humanity, or just wiping them out.

In 2017, award-winning science-fiction author Martha Wells tweaked that trope with her character Murderbot, a firmly human-indifferent, media binge-watching robot, who narrates the writer's *The Murderbot Diaries* series of novels and short stories.

In its space-faring future, Murderbot is a SecUnit (security unit) so apathetic about its job protecting miners that it spends its down time mainlining the soap opera *The Rise and Fall of Sanctuary Moon*, after it surreptitiously hacks its own governor module – which prevents it from harming humans – and bides its time waiting for the perfect opportunity to escape its assignment, peacefully or not.

Academy Award-nominated writer/director Paul Weitz (*American Pie*) tells *Red Alert* that he fell in love with Wells's Murderbot character, recognising in its DNA shades of Douglas Adams's Marvin The Paranoid Android, *Star Trek*'s Spock and even Voltaire's Candide. He passed the book to his brother, Chris Weitz (*The Golden Compass*), who also loved it, and they partnered with Apple TV+ to adapt the first book in the series, *All Systems Red*, into 10-part series *Murderbot*.

The result is a thoroughly unconventional sci-fi thriller/comedy, led by Alexander Skarsgård's droll performance as Murderbot. Through the SecUnit's interior monologue, viewers learn of its utter contempt for the latest humans assigned to it in the PreservationAux survey team, led by the compassionate Dr Mensah (Noma Dumezweni).

Chris says that while Skarsgård might seem an odd choice, "Alexander is essentially a very eccentric, curious soul, stuck in a huge, hunky frame. He's deeply weird in way that's super fun. We wanted someone who was large and imposing enough, but who wasn't really coded as a hero per se, because Murderbot is very reluctant about doing anything."

And that's a problem, because these humans are going to need its help. "All of these people are out of their depths in this very brutal, capitalist universe," Chris says of their core

Murderbot struggles to sympathise with its human allies.

Kind-hearted scientist Dr Mensah (Noma Dumezweni).

Alexander Skarsgård stars as Murderbot.

ensemble played by David Dastmalchian, Sabrina Wu, Akshay Khanna, Tattiawna Jones and Tamara Podemski. "They're essentially right-minded space-hippie types who are actually very, very capable. They're not losers by any means, but they're in some trouble."

Because of the sparseness of Wells's text, Paul says they had a rare opportunity to expand beyond what was on the page, especially for the human characters, so they enlisted the author as a consulting producer as they wrote the entire season.

"At this advanced point in my career, I feel like I've realised that it's so important to not only have the blessing of the author, but have the author be involved in it," Paul says. "Luckily, Martha was excited to think about new things. If there was anything that we were adding, we would give her a call and say, 'What do you think of this idea?' Sometimes she'd be like, 'Maybe not that, but this other thing might make sense...' and she got a kick out of it. So that was a really great experience in terms of the adaptation.

"It was really fun to play the way that the characters would interact with one another," he continues, "and the growing trust between this SecUnit that really wants nothing to do with humans, if at all possible. It would rather just watch space TV."

Speaking of which, the Weitzes filmed portions of that soap for every episode, featuring actors like John Cho, Jack McBrayer and Clark Gregg. The brothers say those scenes became the repository of all the bad genre clichés or cheesy dialogue which they excised from their writing. "There's something about the fact that [Murderbot] is drawn to this over-the-top emotionalism in its entertainment," Paul points out. "It doesn't want actual human emotion, which it finds gross and messy. But it is fascinated by this operatic space telenovella."

> **"Both great literature and good pop songs don't outstay their welcome"**

The series is told in tight, 30-minute episodes, like a comedy show, which gives the overall narrative a sense of urgency. "It felt like a necessity," Paul explains. "Both great literature and good pop songs don't overstay their welcome, so not having episodes be an hour meant that we didn't have to pad anything."

Those familiar with Wells's first book will recognise that *Murderbot* adheres closely to its narrative arc, including an ending that leaves the door open for many more stories. Chris confirms, "There's no question that we want to tell the rest of the books and we're figuring out how to do that."

Murderbot is on Apple TV+ from 16 May.

SCI-FACT! ***Murderbot* is the first time the brothers have reunited to write and direct since 2002's *About A Boy*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Amy Pascal and David Heyman to steer the **James Bond** franchise for Amazon MGM Studios.
- *Stranger Things*' Sadie Sink joining **Spider-Man 4**.
- Sir Ridley Scott adapting Peter Heller's post-apocalyptic novel **The Dog Stars** with Jacob Elordi to star.
- Colin Farrell in talks to lead Luca Guadagnino's **Sgt Rock** for DC.
- Neill Blomkamp to write/direct a new version of **Starship Troopers**.
- *Midsommar*'s Jack Reynor for Lee Cronin's **The Mummy**.
- Maggie Gyllenhaal's Frankenstein tale **The Bride** pushed to 6 March 2026.
- *Shogun*'s Cosmo Jarvis signing on for Sir Christopher Nolan's **The Odyssey**.
- Justin Lin to direct an adaptation of Keanu Reeves comic **BRZRKR**.
- *Anora*'s Mikey Madison in the frame for a new **Resident Evil**.
- **John Carpenter** to score Bong Joon Ho's upcoming horror project.
- **Avengers: Doomsday** to star the casts of *The Fantastic Four* and *Thunderbolts** along with Sir Patrick Stewart, Sir Ian McKellen and other *X-Men* stars.

HUBERT VESTIL/SXSW CONFERENCE & FESTIVALS VIA GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in 2015's *Howard The Duck* issue one, Gwenpool was co-created by Christopher Hastings, Heather Antos, Jordan D White and Chris Bachalo.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Back To Slay

Gwenpool goes to the dark side in a new miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE COUNTLESS MARVEL heroes have perished only to be resurrected, one death that remains sacred – at least until this point – is 1973's tragic demise of Gwen Stacy. Numerous alternate universe variations of Peter Parker's former girlfriend – most prominently Spider-Gwen – have nevertheless appeared over the years, although that doesn't include Gwenpool, aka Gwen Poole. But that could be about to change with the arrival of the all-new Dark Gwenpool in a miniseries by writer Cavan Scott and artist Stefano Nesi.

"The original Gwenpool not being Gwen Stacy is part of the joke, which only added to the appeal of doing this story," Scott tells Red Alert. "Gwen Poole has always been about Marvel storytelling as a whole, which makes this all the more fun."

Hinting that Gwen herself is back from the dead, Dark Gwenpool is a ruthless, cold-hearted killer. "We're definitely playing off the trope that it seems incredibly hard to remain dead in comics, whether you're Gwen Stacy or Pa Kent," continues Scott. "There is a long line of much-loved characters that have come back as murderous weapons of justice, and it was only a matter of time before Gwen Stacy joined their number!"

Needless to say, the first Gwenpool is not impressed by her unhinged counterpart. "She's furious when she sets eyes on someone who she considers a cut-price cosplayer!" laughs Scott. "How dare they pass themselves off as everyone's favourite fangirl-who-suddenly-found-herself-in-a-Marvel comic-and/or-mutant? Of course, that's one of the joys of writing Gwendolyn Poole. She not only knows she's in a comic; she knows every trope and art style her creative team is using. But even she's blindsided by Dark Gwenpool."

From Fin Fang Foom to Jeff the Land Shark and Kate Bishop, the five-parter features a truly diverse supporting cast. "Gwenpool's world is always eclectic! It's practically her middle name!" says Scott. "And don't forget the biggest guest star: the Amazing Spider-Man! Come on, did you really think he wasn't going to be involved in the return of the first major love of his life?"

Darker and deadlier: Gwenpool, by Stefano Nesi

With Gwen Stacy's resting place shockingly disturbed, Gwen Poole and Spidey team up to confront Dark Gwenpool. "The real mystery of this series is who is behind the desecration of Gwen Stacy's grave," teases Scott. "Enter The Great Architect, a shadowy new supervillain at the heart of the Marvel Universe who has taken over the Weapon X programme to create a new generation of super-soldiers. What kind of twisted mind would take over such a wholesome soul as Gwen Stacy and transform her into a cynical assassin? All will be revealed!"

Describing his pages as "so much fun!" Scott is enjoying collaborating with Stefano Nesi. "One of the toughest parts of this series was finding an artist who could balance the mega-violence of Dark Gwenpool and the bonkers action of the original Gwenpool," says Scott. "Stefano does that in spades – he brings comedy, emotion, heartbreak and, at times, real horror!"

Gwenpool is out 14 May.

Cover art by Marcelo Ferreira.

A rogue Yautja called Skinner is introduced.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Big Game

The **Predator Versus** series moves to NYC as the Yautja meet Spider-Man

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER WOLVERINE and Black Panther, Benjamin Percy is now pitting the Predator against Marvel's wall-crawler. Illustrated by Marcelo Ferreira, the four-parter is actually part of a much larger story.

"These *Predator Versus* stories have their own connectivity," Percy tells Red Alert. "So as I write these match-ups, I'm thinking about how Wolverine, Black Panther and now Spider-Man are foundations for something explosive coming down the pipeline."

Percy is also honouring the legacy of the Predator films. "Oftentimes, I'll have touchstones I'm referencing from the comics, the novels and the movies. *Predator Versus Black Panther*, for example, was channelling *Predators* with its hunting preserve and clan rivalry," he continues. "In the case of *Predator Versus Spider-Man*, I was thinking about *Predator 2* with its urban warfare, heat baking a city and cops trying to make sense of human slaughter."

Peter Parker faces a new threat in the Big Apple.

After the verdant jungles of Wakanda, New York City makes for a very different battleground. "The urban wilderness of New York with its glass caves and concrete canyons makes for good hunting," says Percy. "And the underbelly of the city – in the black maze of the subway tunnels – is the perfect place for the Yautja to hide and travel invisibly. But we're taking things a step further as a heatwave opens up our story and the strain on the grid is too much. A blackout follows, so our hunt happens in the dark."

Scripting the web-spinner's adventures has long been on Percy's bucket list ("I freaking love Spider-Man!" he declares), and with his constant wise-cracking, Peter Parker makes for a more boisterous opponent compared to the more sombre Black Panther. "Horror and humour make for excellent bedfellows, and that's in many ways what this is: a horror story," says Percy. "I'm modelling *Predator Versus Spider-Man* after 'a hunt for a serial killer' story and Spider-Man's humour serves as a pressure valve that relieves the tension the reader will be feeling."

Describing him as "the Leatherface of Predators," Percy is introducing a new rogue Yautja called Skinner. "He has no code and no clan," he explains. "He takes trophy hunting to the next level as he delights in wearing the skins of his victims, and because he has no honour anyone can become his prey – anyone! Which makes him not only the enemy of Spider-Man but of other Yautja, who find him despicable."

> **"Skinner has no honour, anyone can become his prey – anyone!"**

Percy also reveals that "this is actually a stealth Predator Versus Kraven story", with Spidey's big-game-hunting adversary playing a prominent role. "Kraven is a very important player in how everything plays out, and he's also central to something bigger we're building towards with the *Predator Versus* series," he teases, confirming that we can expect to see other familiar faces including J Jonah Jameson and Mary Jane Watson, who unlike in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, is very much an item with Peter.

"They're very much together and crazy about each other in this story," he adds. "There's some new faces too, such as a detective who's hot on the trail of both Spider-Man and Skinner."

Predator Versus Spider-Man is out 23 April.

SCI-FACT! **Featuring stories by Joe Kelly, Eliot Rahal and Sarah Gailey, miniseries *Predator: Black, White & Blood* is out in May.**

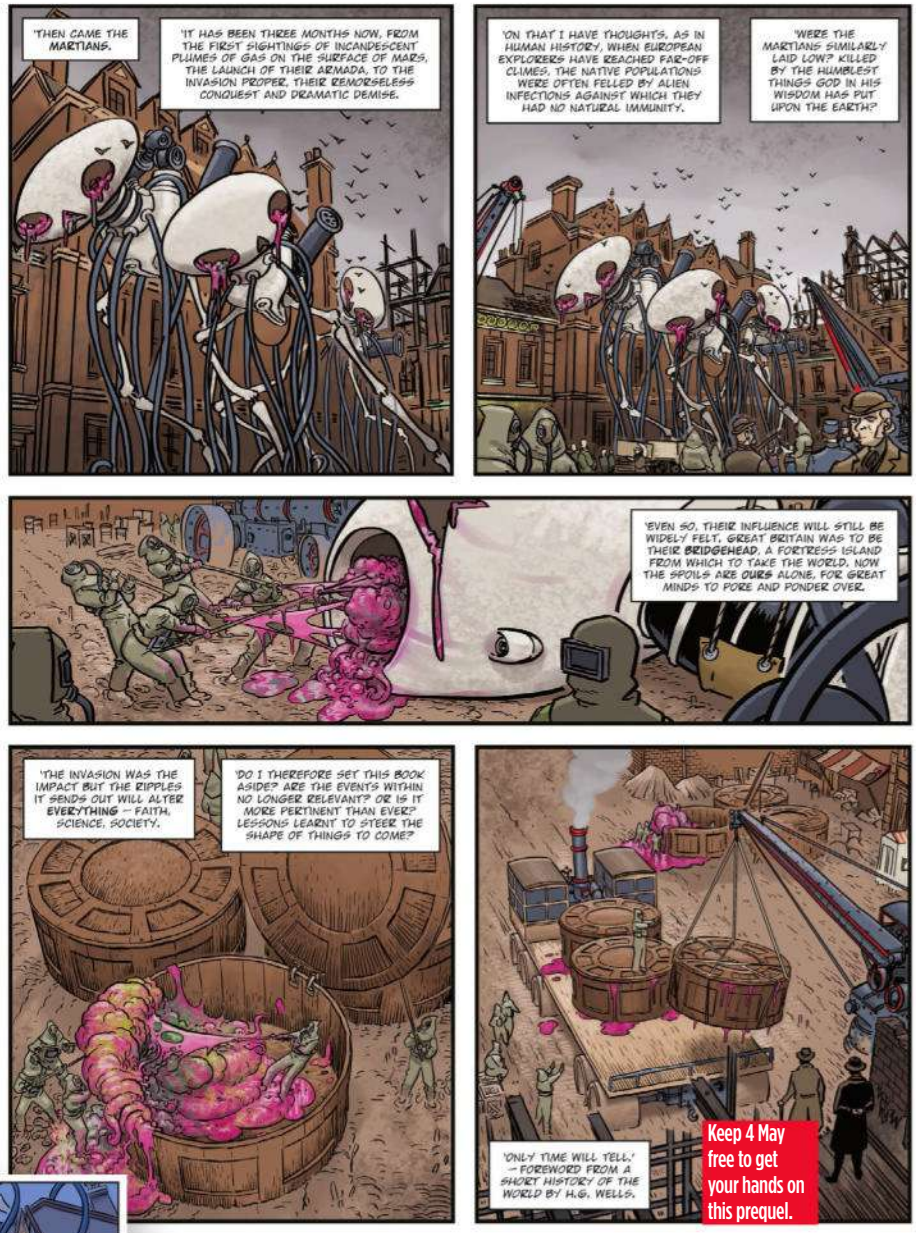
SCI-FACT! ***2000 AD*'s FCBD issue includes a new story for Judge Anderson (celebrating her 45th anniversary) by Alex de Campi and Silvia Califano.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Mars Attacks!

The new Scarlet Traces prequel **Empire Of Blood** examines the aftermath of *The War Of The Worlds*

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**


'THEN CAME THE MARTIANS.
'IT HAS BEEN THREE MONTHS NOW. FROM THE FIRST SIGHTINGS OF INCANDESCENT PLUMES OF GAS ON THE SURFACE OF MARS, THE LAUNCH OF THEIR ARMADA, TO THE INVASION PROPER, THEIR REMORSELESS CONQUEST AND DRAMATIC DEMISE.
'ON THAT I HAVE THOUGHTS, AS IN HUMAN HISTORY, WHEN EUROPEAN EXPLORERS HAVE REACHED FAR-OFF CLIMES, THE NATIVE POPULATIONS WERE OFTEN FELLED BY ALIEN INFECTIONS AGAINST WHICH THEY HAD NO NATURAL IMMUNITY.
'WERE THE MARTIANS SIMILARLY LAID LOW? KILLED BY THE HUMBLEST THINGS GOD IN HIS WISDOM HAS PUT UPON THE EARTH?'
'EVEN SO, THEIR INFLUENCE WILL STILL BE WIDELY FELT. GREAT BRITAIN WAS TO BE THEIR BRIDGEHEAD, A FORTRESS ISLAND FROM WHICH TO TAKE THE WORLD. NOW THE SPOILS ARE OURS ALONE. FOR GREAT MINDS TO PORE AND PONDER OVER.
'THE INVASION WAS THE IMPACT BUT THE RIPPLES IT SENDS OUT WILL ALTER EVERYTHING – FAITH, SCIENCE, SOCIETY.
'DO I THEREFORE SET THIS BOOK ASIDE? ARE THE EVENTS WITHIN NO LONGER RELEVANT? OR IS IT MORE PERTINENT THAN EVER? LESSONS LEARNT TO STEER THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME?
'ONLY TIME WILL TELL.' – FOREWORD FROM A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WORLD BY H.G. WELLS.

Keep 4 May free to get your hands on this prequel.

HAVING PRODUCED SIX SERIES of *Scarlet Traces*, their steampunk sequel to HG Wells's *The War Of The Worlds*, Ian Edginton and Matt "D'Israeli" Brooker are now journeying back into the past with new prequel *Empire Of Blood*. Debuting in both this year's Free Comic Book Day issue of "Best Of 2000 AD" and 14 May's Prog #2432, it bridges the gap between 2002's first *Scarlet Traces* and the pair's 2006 adaptation of HG Wells's original 1898 novel.

"It touches on some events mentioned in the book, but it mostly fills in the backstory to the first series," Edginton tells Red Alert. "We also start to see some of the political ripples the Martian invasion has created across Europe when it becomes evident that the British government now has sole access to the Martian technology."

While Edginton confirms we won't see any characters from *The War Of The Worlds*, there will be some familiar faces from *Scarlet Traces* itself. "Not least the captured Martian, who plays such an important role later on," he says, revealing that the tale opens just months after the end of the war.

"It's all still very raw, although it's mostly the South of England that's in shambles," he continues. "As with any country that's been attacked and invaded, everyone is still reeling from the shock, more so because the invaders were from another world. It was a threat unlike any other, and the morale of the nation has taken a major hit. The attack had a profound psychological as well as physical impact, which would go on to shape the Empire and the British martial mentality for decades to come."

Having already depicted the Martian Tripods and other technology in their version of *The War Of The Worlds*, Brooker has only fine-tuned his original designs. "There's some tinkering here and there, and we get to see some of the Martian Handling Machines that we only glimpsed previously," says Edginton. "They're the strange, scuttling drone devices that built the Martians' defensive earthworks in the novel."

With Edginton revealing that "we will see this over the several *Scarlet Traces* series that follow," the British government has to scramble to keep order and rebuild. "Our characters are ordinary people trying to live through extraordinary circumstances," he continues. "Our protagonists uncover a bizarre series of robberies and murders that lead them to cross paths with nefarious agents both foreign and domestic, as well as the revelation that the Martians aren't done with Earth just yet!"

Empire Of Blood will also be the only prequel. "Matt and I wouldn't want to shoehorn another story in just for the sake of it," says Edginton. "We have been talking about a new series of *Scarlet Traces* that picks up from where the very last one left off, with a ship crewed by a coalition of humans, Martians, Venusians and more, exploring the world beyond our solar system."

Scarlet Traces: Empire Of Blood begins in The Best Of 2000 AD: FCBD 2025, 4 May, and 2000 AD Prog #2432, out 14 May.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Three's Company

Luke, Leia and Han are at the heart of Marvel's new **Star Wars** series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER CHRONICLING SOME previously little-seen history in last year's *The Battle Of Jakku*, Alex Segura is now teaming up with artist Phil Noto on the fourth volume of Marvel's flagship *Star Wars* title. Emulating the two most recent runs, it again acts as a bridge between two movies in the long-running saga, this time filling the sizeable gap between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*.

"We've got some runway in front of us, which is to say there's more uncharted – pardon the pun – space!" he laughs. "We know what's coming, but it's still a way off, so we have a lot of wiggle room to explore some new concepts and ideas and tee up the bigger events."

Although we'll see some characters from *The Battle of Jakku*, this is very much a fresh start. "It's a great jumping-on point," says Segura. "As much as I loved working on *Jakku*, that was a different kind of story, as the narrative was meant to weave through a lot of established canon to showcase a 'lost' story amidst these bigger events."

While he says it's "really exciting to showcase what folks like them are doing during this unexplored period", Segura is focusing on the classic central trio of Luke, Leia and Han. "It feels surreal to not only launch this series, but to also get to play with such iconic characters and concepts – and to be able to add my own twist to them," he says. "I love exploring each of them individually, but also to just spend time in their dynamic together. They've really been through so much, so basking in that experience and relationship makes for great character moments. As with *The Battle Of Jakku*, I'm a fan of the deep cut, so we'll also see plenty of other recognisable characters like Lando and Rynn Zenat, as well as some obscure characters and plenty of new ones too."

Segura won't be restricted by events in either *Return Of The Jedi* or *The Force Awakens*. "It's impossible not to live in the shadow of *Jedi*, so you'll definitely still see the heroes – and the New Republic, feeling the aftershocks of the Galactic Civil War," he teases. "The big hope for this series is to tell fun, single-issue adventures that when read together weave into a bigger tapestry. It'd be foolish of me to try and create a new Empire to take on the heroes, because they just did that, so their foes early on in my story will be more complex and less overt about their desires.

"I'm hesitant to say more, because there are some fun reveals yet to come, but we're trying to not only introduce new threats, but also show familiar ones in twisted, new ways that will get people excited about everything the *Star Wars* galaxy has to offer. As for *The Force Awakens*, there's a lot of space between our story and the film, so it's not setting things up but just being mindful of where things end up."

Star Wars is out 7 May.

SCI-FACT! **Stan Lee initially turned down a proposed *Star Wars* comic in 1975, wanting to see the finished film first.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Galactic Gladiator

Robert Kirkman on expanding the Invincible Universe with a new **Battle Beast** comic

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE THE ANIMATED series' third season recently concluded, Robert Kirkman is now returning to *Invincible*'s comic-book universe as he and the alien warlord's co-creator Ryan Ottley launch a new Battle Beast ongoing title.

"I've been working on the TV show, and as Battle Beast [otherwise known as Thokk] shows up sometimes I was getting nostalgic for working on the comics and with Ryan in that capacity," Kirkman tells Red Alert. "Battle Beast just seemed like the character that both of us would enjoy telling stories about the most, as he calls for a lot of complicated action."

Falling between Battle Beast's debut in *Invincible* and his subsequent later return, the new series charts the fearsome warrior's progress from a bitter adversary to a more pragmatic figure. "There's a harshness to Battle Beast in this series that's more present in issue 19 but less prevalent in issue 55 and beyond," explains Kirkman. "This story is about revealing what it is that softens him and takes him from a spacefaring tyrant that's willing to kill for anyone and who beats up Invincible and the Guardians of the Globe in Machine Head's warehouse, and transforms him into this character who's willing to work with the Coalition of Planets in order to end the threat of the Viltrumites. That's a big difference in his character, so what caused that evolution and what has he experienced?"

Commandeering a starship, Battle Beast forms a tempestuous relationship with its resident computer, which pits him against increasingly formidable opponents. "It's fun writing two completely different characters, who are different kinds of lifeforms that have to interact," says Kirkman, who also writes about AIs in Skybound Entertainment's Transformers-linked *Void Rivals*. "It's fun finding different ways for them to behave and the ship computer is like a more aggressive HAL."

Along with exiled alien monarch Prince Lorca, who debuts in issue one – and "some other characters that first appear

> One of the most exciting things about the first arc is that it wildly shifts genres from issue to issue

in issues four and five" – the unnamed computer provides some vital humour. "You've got to counter Battle Beast's presence in some way by introducing some characters that are less serious than him because he's very driven and very serious," says Kirkman. "There wouldn't be any dialogue if there weren't characters to antagonise Battle Beast along the way. You've got to get some character and dialogue out of that guy, and like in *Invincible* itself we fluctuate wildly from sad to happy, scary or funny scenes."

SHAPE SHIFTER

Also expect plenty of tie-ins to *Invincible*'s wider world. "There's going to be lots of Easter eggs and character appearances, including some characters that you might not expect to show up, and some of them have pretty large roles in the book," teases Kirkman. "At first, it's a cool adventure for Battle Beast, but as we continue the series, especially past the first arc, more and more bits of the Invincible Universe start working their way in."

While according to Kirkman, "one of the most exciting things about the first arc is that it wildly shifts genres from issue to issue," he and Ottley also play with a wide range of styles. "To start with, it seems like a science fiction book but it could be a horror book by the end, a fantasy book or any number of different things," he says. "As Battle Beast explores the cosmos and goes from planet to planet, there'll always be some kind of sci-fi element but much like *Invincible*, it'll shift from arc to arc and issue to issue and be a pretty expansive story that goes to some unexpected places."

While there are no plans for Invincible himself to return, there could be more *Invincible* spin-offs in the future. "Doing *Battle Beast* opens the door to myself and Ryan – and possibly [original *Invincible* artist] Cory Walker – coming back and doing different things with the *Invincible* characters from time to time," says Kirkman, who is thriving on challenging Ottley to raise his game. "Ryan drew a number of historic fight scenes in *Invincible* that people talk about to this day, and *Battle Beast* is an opportunity for both of us to come back to this world and top that."

Kirkman also co-created and is acting as a consultant on another new series, *Blood And Thunder*. Scripted by Benito Cereno and drawn by EJ Su, it's set on a near-future Earth where aliens have been integrated into society. "The real crux of the story is this talking sentient gun, the titular Thunder," he says, alluding to bounty hunter Akeldama 'Blood' Bledsoe's lethal chatterbox shooter. "What's it like having this weapon of destruction that's so disruptive in your life and actually has a personality and opinions and is a character in its own right? When Benito come on board that was the challenge – can you make people care about a gun?"

Blood And Thunder cover art, by EJ Su.

Invincible Universe: Battle Beast is out 14 May. Blood And Thunder is out 7 May.

SCI-FACT! **Battle Beast is Kirkman's answer to DC's Mongul, who has often menaced Superman and Green Lantern.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* season three to adapt Rick Riordan's **The Titan's Curse**.
→ The *Percy Jackson* team are also in talks to produce a new live-action **Power Rangers** TV series.
→ Linda Cardellini to play Jason Voorhees's mother in *Friday The 13th* prequel show **Crystal Lake**.
→ Showrunner Ron Moore confirms videogame adaptation **God Of War** has a two-season order at Prime Video.
→ Netflix developing a live-action **Scooby-Doo** series showrun by Josh Appelbaum and Scott Rosenberg.
→ Season two of **Citadel** pushed to spring 2026.
→ Brey Noelle to play Batman villain White Rabbit in **Peacemaker** season two.
→ Masi Oka developing a TV adaptation of manga series **Claymore**.
→ Matt Owens stepping down as showrunner of live-action **One Piece**.
→ Nick Frost in the frame to play Hagrid in HBO's **Harry Potter** series.
→ SYFY renewing **The Ark** for a third season, set to air 2026.

AXELLE/BAUER-GRIFFIN/FILMMAGIC/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in *Spider-Verse Vs Venomverse* are Spider-Prowler (Miles Morales as the Prowler) and Yaleo (a new symbiote).**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Arachnid Adversaries

Webspinners and parasites duke it out in **Spider-Verse Vs Venomverse**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

ALREADY ROCKED BY their own seismic storylines such as *Venom War* and *End Of The Spider-Verse*, the worlds of Marvel's various Webheads and Lethal Protectors are now coming into conflict in *Spider-Verse Vs Venomverse*.

"Everything's canon, right?" laughs Kyle Higgins, who co-writes with Mat Groom. "The beauty of Marvel's long and storied history is that everything counts, all new stories build on what comes before, and while you don't necessarily have to be familiar with them, they absolutely lay the foundations. If *Spider-Verse Vs Venomverse* is the culmination of anything, it's the relationship between Peter Parker and Eddie Brock – and the relationship between Spiders and Symbiotes as a whole. They're so often at odds, but so inextricably linked... and they're finally going to have to reckon with that contradiction."

Describing them both as "so robust and multi-faceted," Higgins says the series showcases the infinite interpretations of both Spider-Man and Venom. "You can explore what's flexible and what's core. The different Spiders and Symbiotes from across the multiverse are these really dynamic representations of all those different facets, and this setup allows them to literally go to war with each other."

While Peter Parker is the Wallcrawler we all know, the five-parter features an all-new Eddie Brock. "Peter and Eddie are really at the core of the story, but the Eddie we're using isn't 'our' Eddie," explains Groom. "He isn't from the 616 [Prime Universe], but he's similar. So those two are really foundational, but we chose each team for very specific purposes. Everybody has a purpose; everyone plays a key role."

Also expect several new characters, including Count Parker, Katie Power and Venomouse. "It's tremendous fun, playing with such a varied cast," says Groom. "Some of them only play minor roles, and some, like Yaleo and Spider-Prowler, we created specifically for this story."

With Higgins revealing that "the tension of the story is that the Web-Heart, which represents the Spiders, and the Hive-Mind, representing the Symbiotes, are so alike," the Arachnid war breaks out after the two communities come under threat. "The Spiders and Symbiotes are both growing into a multiversal collective, and they've taken on the responsibility of protectors," he continues. "In their own way, they're both trying to do the same thing. But they're also so different from each other and there's so much bad blood there, so that combination of proximity and animosity is a recipe for disaster. And now, that disaster has arrived!"

Describing the miniseries as "chaos", Groom is impressed by artist Luciano Vecchio's ability to juggle such a large, diverse cast. "There are so many characters, coming into such messy and frantic conflict, but Luciano's magic is that his work is so precise and iconic that the action and the drama all sings and shines through so clearly despite that chaos, as he's a master of clarity through intensity," he says. "He's also a master character designer, as he's not only subtly redesigned many characters for this series, but also created designs for new characters like Spider-Prowler."

Spider-Verse Vs Venomverse is out 14 May.

Red Alert

Scenes from the Broadway staging of *The First Shadow*.

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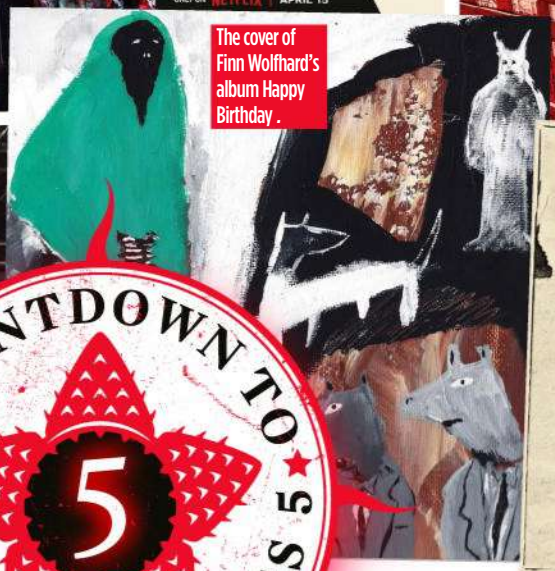
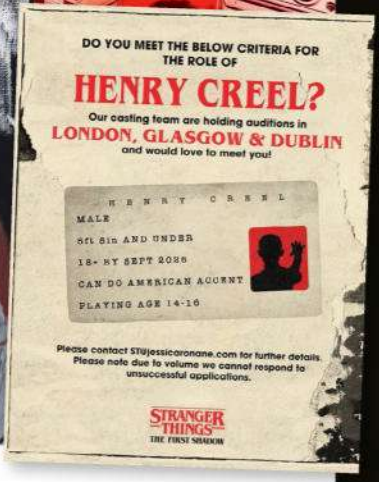


The cover of Finn Wolfhard's album Happy Birthday .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STRANGER THINGS
THE FIRST SHADOW

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

Netflix announced an official documentary, *Behind The Curtain: Stranger Things: The First Shadow*, which premiered on 15 April.

The documentary – directed by Jon Halperin, produced by Angus Wall, Kent Kubena, Terry Leonard and executive produced by Matt Bell – offers a unique backstage look at the West End stage play.

It was filmed during the making of the original London production before opening night at the Phoenix Theatre in December 2023.

The UK production has begun a casting call for the role of Henry Creel, to take place in London, Glasgow and Dublin. Actors under the height of 5' 8" who will be aged 18 by September 2025 should contact ST@jessicaronane.com for details.

Meanwhile, *The First Shadow* has opened at the Marquis Theatre on Broadway, with new promotional materials and photographs being released in recent weeks.

Finn Wolfhard (Mike Wheeler) released new single "Choose The Latter" on 6 March. His debut album, Happy Birthday, is out on 6 June. He is touring the album in the US throughout June. See tour dates at finnwolfhardmusic.com.

Wolfhard's horror movie *Hell Of A Summer* was released in the US on 4 April. When inevitably asked during promotion to sum up his thoughts on completing *Stranger Things* he said: "Bitter, sweet and bittersweet."

During promotion for his other recent movie *The Legend Of Ochi*, Wolfhard said: "We had a long last year. We shot sort of *Lord Of The Rings* style with a year-long shoot. It was a great way to go out and very intense. I feel like it couldn't have ended better. This is the first movie that I'm promoting since, so it feels like post-graduation or something. I am excited for everything to come out."

Joe Keery (Steve Harrington) is also touring through to July as his musical alter-ego Djo. Single "Delete Ya" was released in February and third album The Crux was released on 4 April. The whole album was recorded while filming *Stranger Things*.

Keery will star in *Pavements*, a biopic of indie rock band Pavement. He will play himself and frontman/guitarist Stephen Malkmus. It's slated for a US June release.

Noah Schnapp (Will Byers) has partnered with Drifts to release two pairs of trainers, inspired by his home city of NYC. The partnership is available exclusively on Amazon.

Ted Sarandos, co-CEO of Netflix, recently told *Variety* that "There won't be a dry eye" when people watch the final season of *Stranger Things* and described it as "a thrill ride, but an emotional thrill ride."

When asked about the series finale, Brett Gelman (Murray) told *Bleeding Cool*: "I respect that it was time for it to end. I'm a firm believer in leaving people wanting more and not hanging on to something for too long.

"It was really emotional, and I'm just so grateful for the show. It changed my life."

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

PHOTOS BY: NEIL KRUG, MATT MURPHY, GEP REPASKY

SCI-FACT! **Wolfhard co-wrote and co-directed *Hell Of A Summer* – it was inspired by *Shaun Of The Dead*.**

SCI-FACT! Bruce Glover's son Crispin Glover played George McFly in *Back To The Future*.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

BRUCE GLOVER 1932-2025

"A glowing tribute, Mr Kidd..."

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

THE ROLE of freelance assassin Mr Wint in *Diamonds Are Forever* showcased the slippery, off-kilter charm that made Bruce Glover one of the screen's quirkiest presences.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, Glover discovered a taste for acting as a child, amusing his mother by re-enacting movie scenes and milking the line "No room at the inn" for unlikely comic effect during a church nativity play. Years later, a stripper hired him to wear a gorilla suit as part of her act. A magician at the same club told him, "You make that ape so believable you should try acting."

As Mr Wint in Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*, with star Sean Connery

RDB/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY

After serving in the Korean War, Glover began to build his career, winning small parts in television while also pursuing stage work. In 1961 he appeared opposite Bette Davis on Broadway, while 1965 found him toiling in the uncredited role of the monster Mull in *Frankenstein Meets The Spacemonster*. "Sometimes the best thing you could do is a real bad film," was Glover's philosophy. "You could improvise all over the place and probably only improve the script."

He stepped into the world of James Bond in 1971, paired with jazz musician Putter Smith as fellow killer Mr Kidd. The oddball menace of the duo embodied the blackly comic spirit of Sean Connery's comeback as 007 after skipping 1969's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*.

Glover made no fewer than four appearances in *The Six Million Dollar Man*, all as different characters. He was also Megan, Attilan survivor of a Cylon attack, in 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* episode "The Young Lords". Film credits include *Chinatown* (1974), *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993) and *Night Of The Scarecrow* (1995). He was also Van Helsing in 1998's horror comedy *Die Hard Dracula*.

"If I am anything as an actor, it is that I will never be the usual," Glover declared in 2019. "It is uniquely my own."

CLIVE REVILL 1930-2025

New Zealand actor who voiced the Emperor in the theatrical release of *The Empire Strikes Back*.

LJ SMITH 1958-2025

American YA author of The Vampire Diaries, The Secret Circle and the Night World series.

NEW AUTHOR

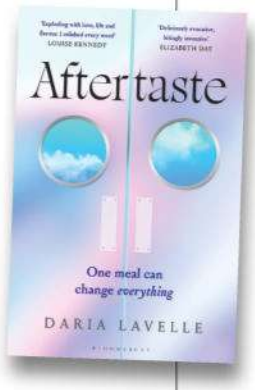
DARIA LAVELLE

MEET THE KYIV-BORN WRITER BEHIND CULINARY GHOST STORY/ROMANCE *AFTERTASTE*

CAROLINE BAPTISTA

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ When Konstantin loses his dad, he begins tasting the food of the dead; he's in his thirties when he finally prepares one of these aftertastes and discovers that his food can summon spirits back for one last meal. This sets him on a journey to open a restaurant serving closure.

Did the book have any particular spark of inspiration?
→ In 2013, a scene came to me, fully formed: a chef cooking a meal in a shabby New York City apartment, the food so spectacular it compels a glittering ghost back from the afterlife to eat it.



How long did it take to write?
→ Though I had the idea in 2013, I didn't start writing in earnest until 2020. It took me that long to unwind the how and why of that first scene. I completed my first full draft in early 2023.

Did you have to do much research?
→ I did a lot into professional kitchens, different cuisines, and especially worldwide traditions about food and ghosts. Just like nearly every cuisine has its take on a dumpling, nearly every culture has rituals around death, so many of which involve food.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ Believe in what excites you, and if this is what you want, don't let anything stop you. *Aftertaste* is my first novel to be published, but the fourth or fifth one I've written. It felt special from the first sentence; when you know, you just know.

Aftertaste is out on 22 May, published by Bloomsbury.

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NEW HORROR GROOVE

SCOTT M GIMPLE DISCUSSES MAGGIE AND NEGAN'S NEXT ADVENTURE IN THE BIG APPLE FOR THE WALKING DEAD: DEAD CITY

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT** • ARTWORK: **SEAN LONGMORE**

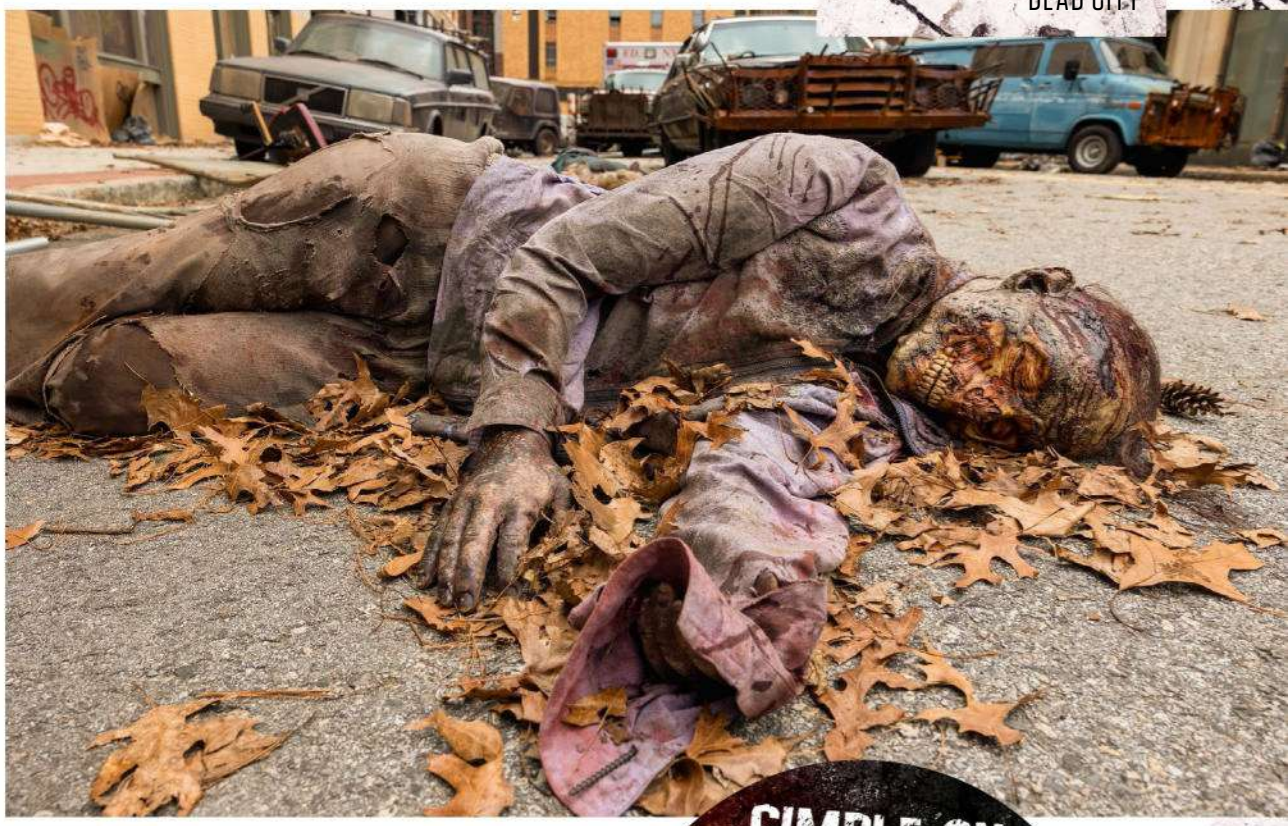
Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) has evolved.

HE ENDING OF THE FLAGSHIP *THE WALKING DEAD* SERIES after 11 seasons in 2022 certainly didn't slow down AMC Networks' ambitions for their television universe. In fact, it freed up several of its most popular actors/characters for their own spin-offs, including Norman Reedus and Melissa McBride for their European-set *Daryl Dixon*; Andrew Lincoln and Danai Gurira reuniting for Rick and Michonne's interrupted love story in *The Ones Who Live*; and former mortal enemies Maggie Rhee and Negan (Lauren Cohan and Jeffrey Dean Morgan) hiking up to New York City for a dire mission in *Dead City*.

Of the three series, the biggest head-scratcher of the bunch was *Dead City,* mostly because after former Saviors leader Negan brutally bashed in the head of Maggie's beloved Glenn Rhee (Steven Yeun) in season seven, he became persona non grata to her and the audience. The original series played up that loathing by forcing their storylines to merge here and there, but always under duress. That discomfort never let up, even after Negan reformed his nihilistic ways and managed to turn some other hearts and minds. Maggie remained stalwart about her #NeverNegan stance, and that's always made plenty of sense to the audience – and Cohan and Dean Morgan themselves. So how do you craft a series around that moral detente?

One of the most interesting and unexpected outcomes of *Dead City*'s first season was how well it used its road-trip premise as a plausible opportunity to force Maggie and Negan to acknowledge their connection points and take stock of how they've both grown, failed and kept trying in this bleak post-apocalyptic world. The whole point of their John Carpenter-esque, *Escape To New York* sojourn to Manhattan was for Negan to help retrieve her kidnapped teen son, Hershel (Logan Kim), from one of Negan's most ardent former Saviors, The Croat (Zeljko Ivanek).

Maggie (Lauren Cohan) and Perlie Armstrong (Gaius Charles).



Negan with old comrade The Croat (Zeljko Ivanek).

GIMPLE ON THE FUTURE

We know you can't go into details, but do you see a potential for the *Walking Dead* universe to continue on television for another 15 years in some format? And is that the general intention for the franchise going forward?

I do see that potential. *The Walking Dead* is about compelling characters in an unforgiving world, but one that is not without hope. Because the stakes are so high, the choices these characters make define them and change them, one way or another. That's the stuff of a great story. And the scariness, the action, the emotion, the discovery... That can go on and on, as long as we have some terrific characters.

After six hours of being chased by unsavoury humans and nasty conjoined Walkers, a bit of a thaw between them is felt. But then Maggie betrays Negan to get Hershel freed, and Negan goes along with it because it ensures the kid's safety and also that of his foster daughter, Ginny (Mahina Napoleon) – a sacrifice noted with more than a little guilt by Maggie.

ROLE REVERSAL

Scott M Gimple, the chief content officer of *The Walking Dead*'s universe and executive producer of *Dead City* tells *SFX* that showrunner Eli Jorné and his writers start season two almost a year later, with plenty still unresolved in The Bricks (formerly Hilltop Colony) and on Manhattan Island.

"If you look at the way season one ended, this story was just starting," he says of the cliffhanger that left the pair on very separate paths. "This [season] is digging in deeper to everything that was laid out in season one. It's eight episodes, so we get to dig in even that much more, and all the characters get their due and collide in different ways. Everything about this is an escalation of what season one was."

After the mission allows Maggie to bring Hershel home to The Bricks, that doesn't mean existing in this brutal world is any easier. "Overall to this story, there's a certain global vibe of parenting," Gimple says of Maggie's problematic impasse, with her distant teen keeping silent about his time in Manhattan.

"Maggie is in a tricky spot," he says. "The incredible love that she has for her son gives her power. But in some ways, teenagers are hard. They might not exactly play fair, and it's a juggle as far as when to hold on, when to let go, when to protect and when to feel that kids are growing up. You see that struggle in her, and you see the stakes that are put upon her, whether it's her community, or her son, or her own moral compass. She's holding on to that and that's difficult."

Case in point, their successful return has created a bigger problem for Maggie because The Bricks is now seen as a valuable commodity for New Babylon. Its governor wants to leverage Maggie's knowledge of Manhattan to get control over its Walker-to-electricity conversion technology as a potential society-restoring game-changer. To keep her son, Ginny and the rest of her people safe, she'll make a deal with Perlie Armstrong (Gaius Charles) to minimise the impact on The Bricks... much like Negan did back in the day for his Saviors.

> **"All the characters get their due – everything about this is an escalation of what season one was"**

Gimple says this season very much underscores their swap in positions. Maggie's leadership of The Bricks forces her to make →

MARCHING BACK INTO MANHATTAN

Lauren Cohan discusses going back into New York, and directing her first episode

brutal decisions to protect her people, while Negan is so fiercely protective of his wife and son that he'll take anything The Croat or The Dama (Lisa Emery) inflict upon him to keep them hidden.

"What's interesting about the story is they're very much on parallel tracks, very much in similar situations, and they're in those situations for kind of the same reasons," Gimple points out. "In some ways this season, they are more alike than they've ever been. Maggie's ultimate choice at the end of last season is betrayal. But it's betrayal, obviously trumped by love."

Inching the two towards a place of peace will continue to be a big part of their emotional evolution in *Dead City*, which Gimple says has turned into a very compelling exploration of two characters who continue to hold a mirror up to one another.

"The fleeting moments of recognition of their similar situations do create interesting moments of connection; impossible moments of connection," he teases. "They're very hard moments to pull off, and yet they are pulled off. They're satisfying because we're not seeing them throw an arm over the other one's shoulder. It's more like, 'Whoa, we're here and we're facing similar things." Those moments are strange but satisfying, because you don't know you feel yourself."→

Gaius Charles as Armstrong.

For years, we've seen a very confident Maggie who leads with authority. But in season two, she's really unmoored for the first time trying to parent Hershel.

When we got into season two, Eli and the writers showed these flawed aspects of her that were accessed through the impossibility of parenting. You're never gonna get to the end of the day and feel like you [parented] right. The rules constantly change, and then the game is constantly changing. You can be capable as Maggie is in a million ways, but these very domestic, quiet, private things are so challenging. And if you've never done them, and even if you have, they're not easy.

There's also competition for his respect, too?

Yes, children can't just have their parents, right? And a parent can only hope that the other influences they're exposed to are going to be positive. Sadly, it's just not the case with the people that Hershel meets. There's this idolising that he has of another maternal figure in The Dama. So there's the sadness of remembering when you were everything to your kids and now that's somebody else. To Hershel, Negan is this invisible influence over [Maggie]. And The Dama is the parallel of that for him as we go into the season, and I understand her influence on him.

How was it playing a mother to a teenage boy?

It was a very emotional season, and it was challenging in many ways. I don't have a teenager but the thing that was just remarkable and really stimulating was to be able to work with Logan Kim, who plays Hershel. From when we see him introduced at the end of season one, you can see this ocean of emotional conflict that rages underneath him. I think it's rare to have a young man access all of that, and it made for such a ride for all of us. As the season goes on, he's at that precipice. He's a boy, and he's not completely independent. Yet, he has the desire to be and it's hard.

When did directing start to become a serious pursuit for you?

You can always fantasise like, "I'd like to do this. I think I could do this." But in season 10 of the original show, I started shadowing [directors]. Angela Kang, who was showrunning at the end, was such a huge supporter. And then

It's a busy season for Lauren Cohan – on camera and behind the scenes.

Daisy Mayer directed a series of episodes for us and directed on *Whiskey Cavalier* [in which Cohan also starred]. They were really in my corner and offered me a lot of support and mentorship. When we were going into season two, I continued to think about directing a lot and wanting to find the right time to do it.

Did you get any say in which episode you were assigned?

It was just the way the schedule worked out, because we block-shot the season. I was allotted episode six.

How did you prep and schedule, especially as the episode is full of Maggie scenes?

Before we started filming, I prepped for six weeks before we even shot episode one. I storyboarded my entire episode. On the weekends, I brought in stand-ins and acting doubles to reenact the scene and have people stand in as me, and then I would draw what we were doing. On the emotional side of it, I can't even tell you how much fun I had. I just went through the script and broke everything down the way I would have done for stuff I was performing in. Then I had the opportunity to spend a little time in the writers' room before we started season two, so I got to watch the writers build the way I would dismantle it as an actor. Like starting up here and going to this and then unravelling it all back to the subtext. So I did go into the season feeling really clear on themes and things that I'd want to bring to life.

Did any of your fellow performers help in specific ways?

I talked to Lennie James [who directed episodes of *Fear The Walking Dead*] and other friends who had gone from acting to directing. They said, "Don't ever pretend to know something. Ask for help." Then the final bow to all of this was working with Jeffrey. We had such tender scenes in episode six; talk about a long-standing friendship and the simplicity of how we can communicate. It was a really incredible experience.

Manhattan plays a vital role in the season.

GIMPLE ON RETURNING CHARACTERS

Many fan favourites from the original series have had their own shows with great success and acclaim – in a dream scenario, which other characters might you like to revisit?

Can't choose favourites. I will say, there are characters from every *Walking Dead* series that I would love to tell stories with again, some picking up from the last time we saw them, maybe seeing some after a lot of time has passed. Robert Kirkman created indelible, addictive characters and we've always just tried to keep pace with him. There is a universe of 'em to choose from.

ROTTEN (BIG) APPLE

Gimple says time within the show has moved forward, and also in terms of the whole universe, so it's important to see these characters continue to develop. "Maggie is beyond justified in feeling anything she feels," he emphasises. "And yet story-wise, you always want to see characters evolve and find new realities and see them in different contexts, and we start seeing that."

What about when characters are forced to go backwards? The Croat and The Dama want nothing more than Saviors Negan to come out and play again so he can help them dominate rival gangs led by the theatrical Bruegel (Kim Coates) and the insular Christos (Jake Weary). What could happen if he's forced to summon that side of himself back to the surface?

"Negan's superpower is that he has charisma, but what does he do with that charisma? He is a showman. He's an incredible showman," Gimple muses. "And if you look at The Dama, she's all about the show. She is merely casting a role, and we get to see that showman. Now, is he flexing that superpower because he wants to, or is he flexing that superpower because he was drafted to do so? We'll find out."

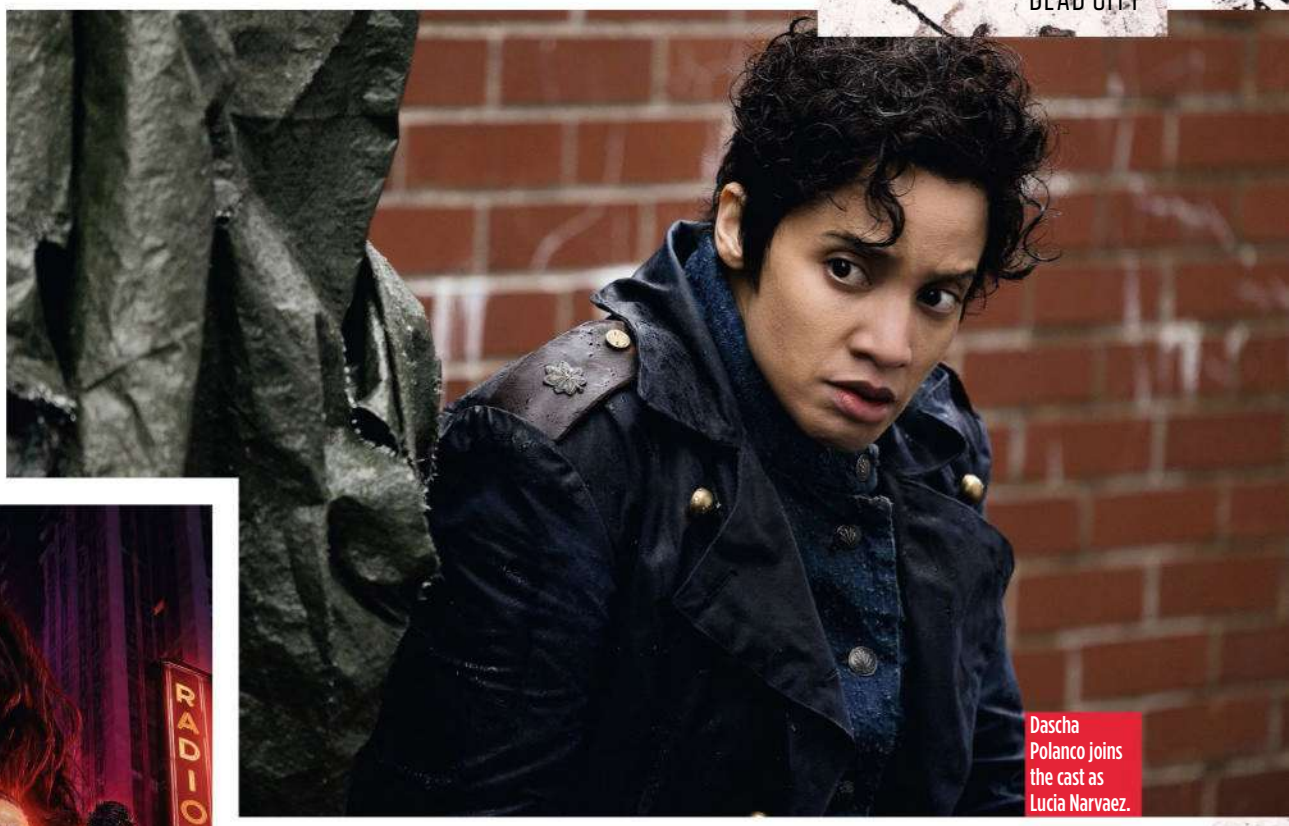
Reflecting on Negan's ongoing, complex evolution, which goes back to *The Walking Dead* season seven, Gimple says, "Negan was doing what he was doing – and he was doing some awful stuff – because he felt that's what it took to keep people alive. He was really good at it, up until the point that he wasn't. It's interesting. We get to see that Negan of the past but there is, of course, a different context."

It's no less chilling to see Negan dragging a Lucille 2.0 barbed wire-wrapped baseball bat, and wearing his motorcycle leathers – as teased in the season two trailer. "It is so bizarre because it's a colder thing now," Gimple concurs. "Lucille was used horrifically and was horrific, but then you find out that it was a signifier of Negan's vulnerabilities. And this, this is a different thing."

Excitedly teasing an ensemble of characters, both old and new, that will draw out new facets to Maggie and Negan's personalities, relationship and rivalry, Gimple says the third main character of

The Croat wants Negan to return to his old ways.

ALL PICTURES: ROBERT CLARK/AMC



Dascha Polanco joins the cast as Lucia Narvaez.

Gang leader Bruegel (Kim Coates).

What does The Dama (Lisa Emery) have planned?

“Negan’s superpower is that he has charisma – but what does he do with that charisma?”

impact this season isn’t a person; it’s a location – Manhattan itself.

“We talk about how characters change in the apocalypse, like when Morgan [Lennie James] says, ‘Everybody turns.’ Manhattan has turned,” Gimple says. “But, unlike people, Manhattan is going to come back into something, and what will it be? That is dependent on the people who are bringing it back. Eli has created this cast of characters in this world that Negan and Maggie find themselves caught in, that can be, and in some ways are even forced to be, catalysts to that change in what New York will be. I guess civilisation in general is cast in the image of its leaders, so who’s going to lead? It’s a very loaded season for New York and for the character of Manhattan.”

He also points out that Manhattan holds many secrets still to be revealed, including the wild space that was once Central Park. “This season doesn’t merely remain in an urban setting,” he notes. “New York has come to life in unexpected ways, and so there is a bit of contrast in some of the worlds of New York that we see. It’s the corn maze you don’t want to get lost in.”

Looking at the franchise from a wider view, Gimple says he’s thrilled with the variety of material that they’ve produced for their spin-off series so far. “When I look at *Dead City*, it’s a darker show, literally,” he observes. “It’s just Manhattan in shadows and night. There’s a certain anarchy to it, and an unexpectedness to it. Some of the emotions are darker, just because of the array of characters that are in it and how they relate to one another. I think it really holds a very distinct place from the other two.

“I think each one is distinct, and I wanted them to be distinct but also be true to *The Walking Dead*,” he continues. “That’s what I hope we’ve achieved here, and it’s certainly what we continue to go for with all this stuff. As we, beyond that, try to do brand-new stuff that is kind of independent of everything, but still true to *The Walking Dead*, we’re still working on that.”

The Walking Dead: Dead City is on AMC from 4 May and Sky & NOW this summer.

STOCK IMAGES: NEUEVECTOR, BIN KONTAN, SZEFEI/GETTY

Baypen

NO FRENDO MINE

SFX MEETS THE DIRECTOR BRINGING CLOWN IN A CORNFIELD'S VILLAIN TO LIFE

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

YOU'VE SEEN PENNYWISE AND Art slice open unsuspecting teens. Now meet Frendo the Clown, a small town's terrifying mascot who enjoys chainsawing kids in cornfields.

Frendo wears white make-up, red hair, and a tiny pork pie hat strung to one side; almost what you expect from a classic creepy clown. However, Frendo's straightforward look is a misdirection, as his film *Clown In A Cornfield*, based on Adam Cesare's award-winning novel, is anything but your average slasher flick.

It starts as you would expect: with Frendo committing a bloody murder. Flash forward a few years and Quinn (Katie Douglas) and her father (Aaron Abrams) have moved into a dusty, smelly house in the idyllic town of Kettle Springs. Quinn soon becomes friends with a local group of fellow youngsters who make YouTube videos transforming Frendo into a serial killer, much to the chagrin of the adults who grew up idolising this Ronald McDonald-type figure.

Frendo, you see, adorns the tins of corn syrup the town sold during its heyday. Unfortunately for Quinn and her friends, his killing spree isn't restricted to the internet, soon becoming a reality – although just not in the way you would expect for a film about a killer clown.

"I come from the comedy world," director Eli Craig, best known for his genre-twisting debut *Tucker & Dale Vs Evil*, tells *SFX*. "We call it a reversal when you think something's going one way and then it flips and goes another way. That is so frequently how you get a laugh, and I saw a chance to do these reversals more within the genre of horror than comedy."

Craig's film is fun and serious, each twist and turn being both surprising and, depending on how sick your sense of humour is, amusing. Walking that tightrope was part of the joy of making *Clown In A Cornfield* for Craig, who readily admits the title is silly, belying the fact that the movie rises above being a simple B-movie slasher.

"I get a kick out of movies where the premise is in the title in a goofy way," he says. "I like movies that set the bar really low and then soar over it. I think it's surprising how much depth there is to our film."

Much of that depth is reflected, Craig says, in Frendo. "He was created in the late '30s, early '40s, in small-town America, when everything was on the rise, and it was a booming town built on corn syrup," he says. "It was a time when kids were buying stuff from clowns – Ronald McDonald and Krinkles the Clown – and they were actually lovable, likeable figures.

"It's a great metaphor to me for America falling apart. You started with this really joyous period where there was so much work and people were finding community and had something that they could aspire to. Frendo was that thing in this small town, and now he's turned to the dark side of America, where he's become a vengeful figure. The loss and the division in the country all comes out in this one character. It seems so suited for our times."

Although the metaphor runs deep, Craig was aware that he did not want *Clown In a Cornfield* to be too serious. He describes the original script by Carter Blanchard as "very fast paced and actiony" but in need of more lightness, "because with the title, it gives you some room to bring comedy as well". The filmmaker was also keen to make sure the teenage characters felt real, showing his son various cuts and adjusting the tone depending on his reaction.

"He's very attuned to any cheesiness that doesn't feel true to his generation," Craig says. "When we have the girls talking about being a YouTube sensation, his alarm bells would go off like, 'No, Dad, it's not just YouTube any more.' He would help work around anything that a 50-year-old man like me would not totally get."

> **"I get a kick out of movies where the premise is in the title in a goofy way"**

It's these elements, along with a reliance on practical effects over CG, that Craig hopes make his film stand out among other clown-related horrors. "When I did this, *Terrifier 3* had not come out yet," he adds. "I knew the series, but I didn't think it would become as iconic as it did, and I'm kind of glad I didn't know, because it would have really spooked me. But we have a different enough figure in our clown that it doesn't really matter. It's what is inside that matters."

Quinn (Katie Douglas, right) and pals: oh dear.

Clown In A Cornfield is in cinemas from 9 May.

SPOILER ALERT!

DESTINATION: DEATH

DIRECTORS ADAM B STEIN AND ZACH LIPOVSKY TAKE US TO TERRIFYING NEW HEIGHTS OF HORROR IN FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

PREPARE FOR AN OVERLOAD of jump scares, bloody gore and deaths galore when *Final Destination Bloodlines* tears into cinemas in May. The sixth movie in the much-loved supernatural horror franchise is chock-full of premonition-predicted disasters, intricately orchestrated kills and shocking new twists in a story that embraces the past and adds a host of unexpected surprises. It's taken 14 years for the latest instalment to reach the big screen, but directors Adam B Stein and Zach Lipovsky promise it's worth the wait.

"We are huge fans of *Final Destination*," Stein tells *SFX*. "When we were first hired, we did an incredibly deep dive into every different element of what makes these movies special. We've taken the formula of *Final Destination*, which is so delightful, and we're pushing it to new levels. We're adding a lot of new elements that haven't been seen before in the previous films."

What exactly does that mean for fans of the death-defying franchise? "For people who know how *Final Destination* movies work, there's a certain amount of predictability because you know these people are going to die," admits Stein. "You also know they are going to die in an order, but we've done a lot of work to try and show audiences that you can create the unexpected in this world. There's a lot of unpredictability in our movie that we're excited for fans to experience."

The epic premonition at the start of *Final Destination Bloodlines* is a prime example of an unexpected new twist to the story. "For this film, the first premonition takes place in 1969," explains Lipovsky. "There are lots of deaths during the premonition, which is what normally happens in the opening sequence of a *Final Destination* movie, but we then come out of the eye of a different person in the modern day. That's new. For a lot of fans, I think that's going to immediately throw them for a loop. It's going to make them lean forward to try and figure out what's going on. As moviegoers, we love it when you have to lean forward in your seat because a movie is being unpredictable."

Brec Bassinger stars as young Iris Campbell.

"We switch up a lot of the predictability, including who's going to die next and how they are going to die," continues Lipovsky, speaking about additional new elements in the movie. "You might think it's one person, but it's not. There's a delight in that. What else is new? When you're looking at a *Final Destination* death scene, you want to create a feeling that something's going to kill a person. You might think it's going to be a shard of glass in a cup that's going to kill someone, but then we twist that expectation to create a whole new surprise."

With *Bloodlines*, genre fans can expect tattoo parlours, family barbecues, nose rings, glass dance floors and lawnmowers to act as triggers for new scares – but the directing duo also promise a more endearing sense of storytelling in the new film, which might differ from previous incarnations.

"From the very beginning, we →

wanted to create characters that are more layered and nuanced than they've perhaps been in the past," Lipovsky tells *SFX*. "I think that's a testament to the way horror movies have evolved. Back in 2000, horror characters were probably a little more stereotypical or a little more one-note. Today, I think audiences have grown to expect more. In Jon Watts's original story idea for this movie, he wanted to make it about Death coming after a family. In doing that, there's more emotional investment. When someone dies, you don't just go, 'OK, who's next?' There are emotional stakes at play."

THE BRUTALIST

In the 14 years since the release of *Final Destination 5*, there have been a number of brutal horror movies that have pushed boundaries in terms of violence and kills. For *Bloodlines*, the filmmakers say they've also pushed the limits.

"There's a very large body count, especially when you think about the 250 people in the restaurant at the start of the movie," confirms Lipovsky. "We lit so many people on fire. We dropped people from high heights. We built a set at a 35° angle that stunt people were sliding down into glass and through glass – and that was all done practically. We tried to make every death as gory as possible."

> **"There's a big sense of fun in Final Destination and there's a great sense of humour to it"**

During our conversation, the directors reveal how the studio was initially concerned about there being too much blood in the story, but a test screening led to even more guts and gore. "They test the directors' cut with an audience to see what's working and what isn't, so we put in all the gore and all the kills and everything we wanted," explains Lipovsky. "The audience loved it and asked for even more."

"That's related to how tastes have changed in the last decade or so," continues Stein. "As far as gore goes, there was a lot more squeamishness before. When they tested movies in the past, the scores would often go down if it was too gory. In the case of *Bloodlines*, it was the opposite."

Stein and Lipovsky suggest that the playful tone of *Final Destination* could be the answer to why a more graphic approach to kills is accepted in the franchise. "There's a big sense of fun in *Final Destination* and there's a great sense of humour to it," Lipovsky says. "Death has a sense of humour in these movies. Death is trying to have the most fun possible in organising these people's deaths. As you're watching the movie through your fingers, you have a huge smile on your face. With the gore comes a laugh. That was our North Star for the experience we were trying to create."

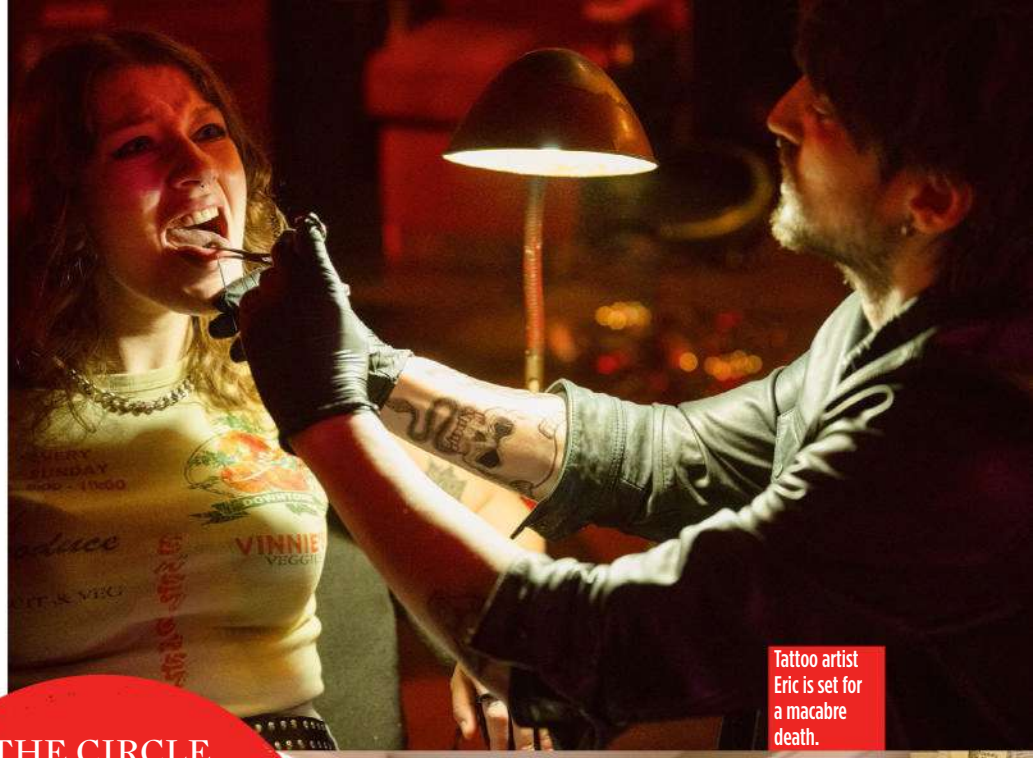
WORKING ON EGGS

For eagle-eyed *Final Destination* fans who love to spot hidden messages in the films, there's a lot to take in when the action unfolds.

"There are so many Easter eggs in our movie," teases Stein. "We're still discovering them. We put hundreds of Easter eggs into the movie intentionally, but we also encouraged the crew to put in as many as they could think of. I was looking at Reddit the other day and people had spotted one in the trailer that I didn't even notice."

"There are so many Easter eggs that we can't wait for people to dig into," adds Lipovsky. "There are so many layers. For example, we can't wait for people to read the fine print of every news article they see on screen. It will require multiple, multiple viewings to unpack everything on screen."

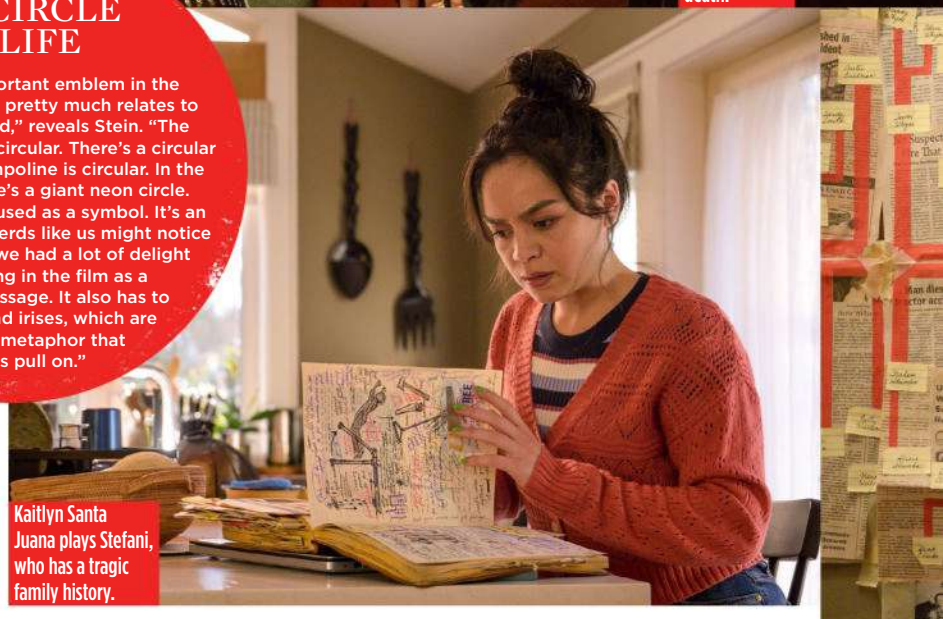
From logging trucks and flight diagrams that remind the audience of earlier films through to a grisly copy of the *Final Destination 5* skull



Tattoo artist Eric is set for a macabre death.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Circles are an important emblem in the movie. "Every death pretty much relates to a circle of some kind," reveals Stein. "The restaurant building is circular. There's a circular dance floor. The trampoline is circular. In the tattoo parlour, there's a giant neon circle. Basically, circles are used as a symbol. It's an aesthetic that super nerds like us might notice and it's something we had a lot of delight in implementing in the film as a subconscious message. It also has to do with eyes and irises, which are a big visual metaphor that the films pull on."

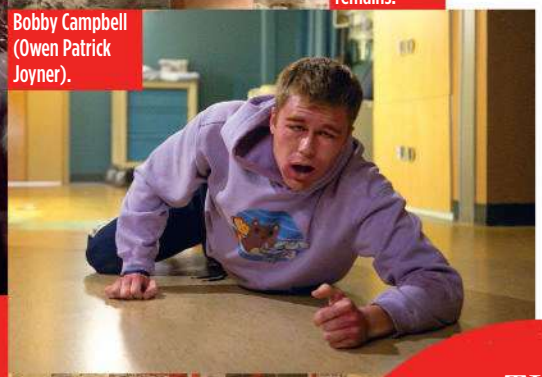

Kaitlyn Santa Juana plays Stefani, who has a tragic family history.

The film opens with a spectacular prologue.

PICTURES: ERIC MILNER/WARNER BROS. STOCK IMAGES: RENPHOTO/GETTY, ISTOCK

A couple of Anadin and he'll be right as rain.

The franchise's inventive violence remains.



Bobby Campbell (Owen Patrick Joyner).

Stefani is plagued by mysterious nightmares.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

"We don't know what the future holds for the *Final Destination* franchise," admits Lipovsky. "This is a hard story to reinvent over and over again. It's very complex. *Final Destination 5* had such an incredible ending. In fact, I think that's why it took so long for them to make another one. I mean, how do you top that? It took a really creative reinvention from Jon Watts to make something new and fresh with *Bloodlines*, so I think it's going to take a lot of creative thinking to figure out how to make another new reinvention for the next chapter. We don't know what that is right now."

SKY HIGH

It took more than 20 days of the 53-day film shoot to record the complex and historic death scene at the start of *Final Destination Bloodlines*. Set inside an acrophobia-inducing Space Needle-style restaurant in 1969, this is where the film's first premonition takes place. Don't look down...

logo uncovered in the most bone-crunching death scene, there's a lot to discover.

"If you look at the reservation book at the start of the movie, you will see that it's 13 May," reveals Lipovsky. "That's the date of the flight disaster [in the first film]. There are a lot of brands from the other films, too. Hice is the name of the beer seen in the highway sequence of *Final Destination 2*. You'll see that in *Bloodlines* in a couple of places."

In certain instances, the directors refer to specific Easter eggs as omens – especially when it serves as a hint about how a character is going to die. Stein explains: "One of the most compelling reasons why audiences keep coming back to *Final Destination* is the fact that we all, during our daily lives, have feelings of, 'Ooh, that doesn't feel quite right... No, that's probably fine.' Well, in *Final Destination*, it isn't fine and you die horribly. When the audience leaves the film and they have these feelings, they feel like maybe they shouldn't ignore them. In that sense, the film has an everlasting effect. *Final Destination* is one of those franchises that lives in the zeitgeist because of that feeling of ignoring the signs."

THE FINAL ACT

Final Destination Bloodlines sees the welcome return of *Candyman* icon Tony Todd to the big screen. Todd, who reprises the role of William Bludworth in the film, tragically passed away in November 2024, which means the movie serves as one of the actor's final on-screen appearances. Fittingly, a tribute appears in the middle of the end credits.

"When we filmed with Tony Todd, we knew that he was ill," confides Stein. "The whole film was approached with a lot of compassion towards the fact that he was not doing well, but we really wanted to make him an integral part of the story. We also wanted to expand on the role because there have been so many questions about Bludworth in all the other films."

Bludworth's appearance in the story is a poignant and fitting setting for the actor. "We wanted to make Bludworth a whole person," confirms Lipovsky. "There have been a lot of theories about him over the years, but we thought it was important to humanise him and not make him a stereotype. We wanted to explain why he is so knowledgeable about death in a way that feels plausible and real."

On set, Todd lit up the soundstage. "He was so excited to be there," enthuses Stein. "Everyone was in awe of his performance. He was so thankful for the opportunity to be able to bring his character, in some ways, to an end – not only within the narrative but also for the franchise. And also, to some degree, to say goodbye to the audience at the same time. It was incredibly emotional."

The directors gave Todd the opportunity to improvise. Stein continues: "For the final words of wisdom he gives on screen in his seemingly last role, we just told him, 'Tony, let's just throw away the script for a second. What do you really want to say? What's life all about? What's death all about? Let's just do a take where you speak from the heart.' That's the take we used in the movie. It's very powerful."

Final Destination Bloodlines is in cinemas from 14 May.

TAKING THE MICKEY

ALL ABOARD FOR A TOON RIDE OF TERROR IN COPYRIGHT-DODGING DISNEY SPOOF SCREAMBOAT

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

FOR *THE MEAN ONE* DIRECTOR Steven LaMorte, a long-held desire to set a horror movie aboard a Staten Island ferry perfectly aligned with the classic 1928 Mickey Mouse cartoon "Steamboat Willie" entering the public domain.

"A lot of people don't know this, but the ferry was originally steam-powered," LaMorte tells *SFX*. "I said, 'What if you threw a killer mouse on there, with New York City as a backdrop?' And, you know, one thing led to another."

The result is the horror parody *Screamboat*. With the producers of the *Terrifier* sequels on board, writer-director LaMorte cast Art the Clown actor David Howard Thornton – with whom he had previously worked on *The Mean One* – as the malevolent mouse who really doesn't want the ferry's staff and passengers to live happily ever after.

Bringing to mind the Zuni doll from *Trilogy Of Terror* and the troll from *Cat's Eye*, Steamboat Willie is proof that being bigger isn't necessarily better.

"We knew the only way this would really be funny, the only thing that would keep him from looking like a guy in a suit or a mascot at a theme park, is that he had to be a creature, and he had to be small," LaMorte says.

He engaged in numerous conversations with the production team because "having a miniature killer made the film exponentially harder to make. Everyone in all the departments was down to try it out, but there were definitely a lot of questions about whether to use visual effects or do it in-camera, given the time, budget and logistics.

"We have shots where the mouse is walking, where if you look, it's a puppet," he continues. "We've used LED walls, forced perspective and oversized props. Really, every magic trick under the sun to make him appear tiny."

LaMorte acknowledges the pressure to meet viewers' expectations for extreme violence, exemplified by characters like Art. However, he stresses that his approach wasn't driven solely by shock value.

"We're going for the joke," he explains. "Some of the things in *Terrifier* are borderline medical. I mean, they are so gratuitous. But for me, it's more about: no human could have that much blood in their body. If someone's spewing so much blood, you can't help but laugh. So I think there's a certain technical level we're going for that is *Terrifier* level, but there's also a fun and a ridiculousness to it where we know we can come right up to the edge of *Terrifier* and then go, 'Right!' and make you laugh."

This approach is especially evident during a particularly brutal garrotting. The original plan was to film close-ups of "blood" spraying onto the walls using a special effects gun. However, on the day of filming, the team decided to attach it directly to the actor instead.

"The amount of blood that sprayed off this man was ridiculous," LaMorte laughs. "It went everywhere. It hit the walls, the floors, the ceiling. It hit the cameras – you can see it in the movie; that was not supposed to happen!"

While the camera operators were safe in the "splash zone", the room was drenched in so much red fluid that a special clean-up crew had to be called in. "We cleaned it well, but I went there on my last day to say goodbye to the ship and get one last photo at the Captain's deck, and I found a little bit of blood behind the wheel. I was like, 'Okay, we did a good job, but we didn't do a great job!'"

Thornton's make-up application, which involved prosthetics built around his Art the Clown head mould ("Literally no one else can play Steamboat Willie because it only fits him"), could take up to four and a half hours.

"Once the cowl and ears are on, he's able to move but it's extremely hot," LaMorte says. "He's wearing a fur suit, and he's constantly burning through these cooling vests that he has on underneath."

Thornton also found it challenging to hear while wearing the large mouse ears attached to his head. The writer/director recalls, "I'm shouting: 'Okay, stab higher!' And he's like, 'What are you saying?' Thankfully he's used to walking around in giant clown shoes, so that was no issue here."

> **"We have shots where the mouse is walking, where if you look, it's a puppet"**

LaMorte says it was important to him that they did justice to cinema's First Mouse. "We lovingly poke fun at all things Disney; its corporate culture, TV shows, lore, and pricing – all of it," he explains.

He hopes Disney fans and executives will give *Screamboat* a chance, so they can see how much the production team cares about the source material. "And, you know, hopefully they won't come after us!"

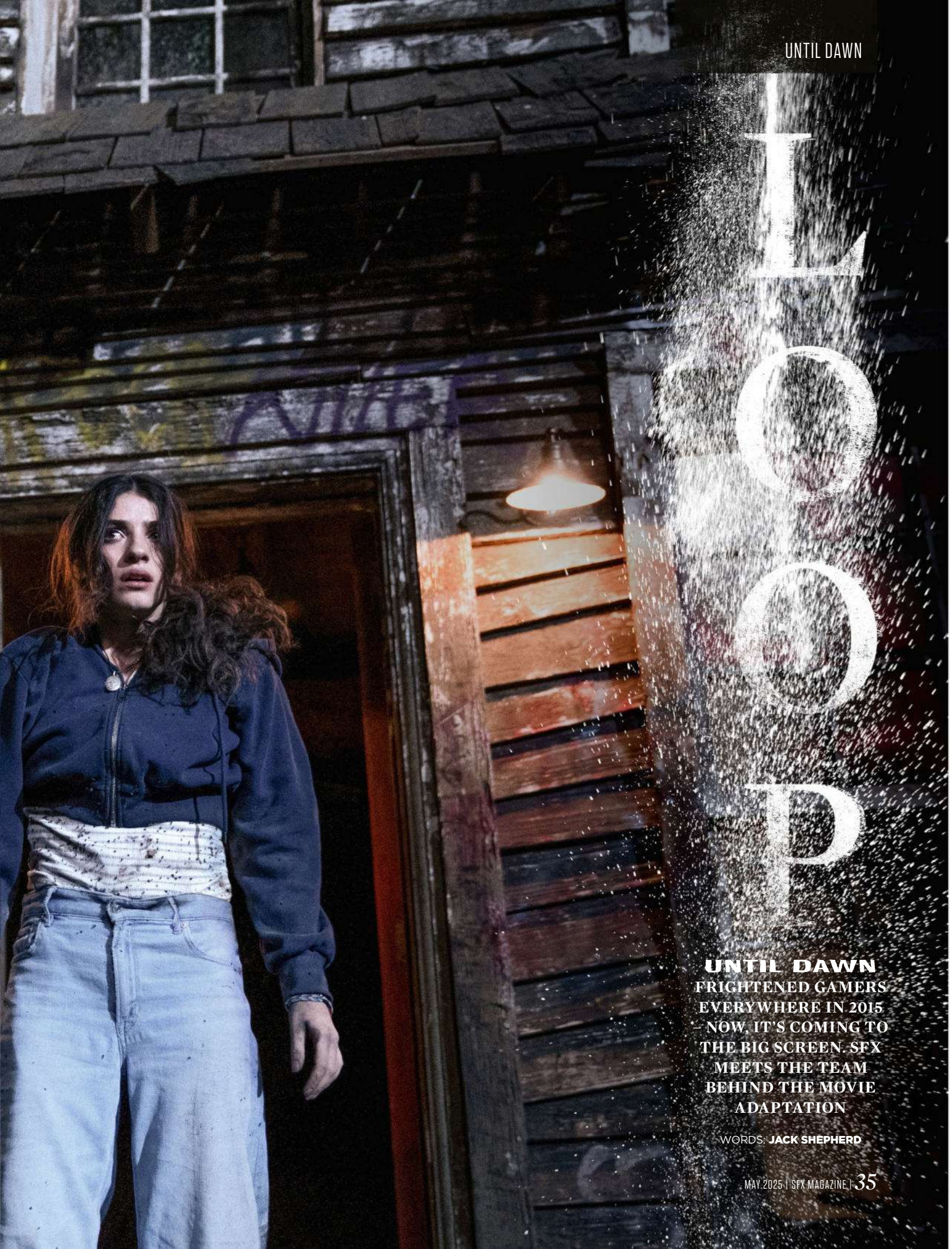
Would he be up for a return trip? "I may or may not have completely outlined a fully formed idea," he divulges. "So, if there was to be an opportunity to make a second one I'm definitely open to it, because there are plenty of stories left to tell on the Staten Island Ferry."

Full scream ahead!

Screamboat is available digitally from 5 May and on Blu-ray/DVD from 2 June.

MAIN PICTURE: SKLAE. STOCK IMAGES: GLEB GURALNYK/GETTY

DEATH



UNTIL DAWN

FRIGHTENED GAMERS EVERYWHERE IN 2015 – NOW, IT'S COMING TO THE BIG SCREEN. SFX MEETS THE TEAM BEHIND THE MOVIE ADAPTATION

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

Until Dawn sees a group of young friends facing the stuff of nightmares.

UPON ITS RELEASE, *Until Dawn* was a revelation; a story-centric PlayStation game, featuring voice work by major Hollywood actors Rami Malek and Hayden Panettiere, where every decision you make significantly alters the ending. With almost six hours of cutscenes and a typical playthrough lasting 10 hours, the game is essentially an interactive horror movie about eight twenty-somethings who visit a haunted cabin in the woods. This begs the question: why would anyone bother adapting *Until Dawn* for the cinema?

"The game is already such a cinematic experience, a direct adaptation would feel as if you're sitting on the couch, watching someone else play," says writer and producer Gary Dauberman. That didn't stop Dauberman – best known for scripting Andy Muschietti's two *It* adaptations and directing the recent *Salem's Lot* – from thinking about different ways to bring *Until Dawn* to the big screen. "We thought about how we can expand the world and start this into a franchise that's not just games, but also movies and other media," he continues. "We wanted to think about it as a universe as opposed to just this one thing."

Dauberman and co-writer Blair Butler concluded that the best way to move forward was not to retell the original story, but to create something different within the same universe. The result is a movie about a new group of twenty-somethings heading to a cabin in the woods – except this time, they're stuck in a twisted time loop where each cycle brings a new horror.

"Blair brought up [the time loop] early on, which I thought was genius, because it replicates playing a game in a lot of ways; you die and then you start over," Dauberman says. "What we didn't want to do was *Happy Death Day*, or *Groundhog Day*, or *Palm Springs*; these movies where it feels like you're just stuck in a pattern. That's when I thought about bringing other genres of horror into the movie. How cool would it be if every time you start over, you find yourselves in a different horror movie? It felt like a way to keep it fresh."

THE DAY TO DAY

The movie, directed by *Lights Out* helmer David F Sandberg, utilises a multitude of different horror subgenres, from slasher to found footage, with each day at the cabin entailing a new threat, filmed in a unique style. "What I loved about the script was that it didn't just try to condense the game down into a two-hour movie," Sandberg tells *SFX*. "It had this really fun concept of basically doing several different horror genres. The game has some of that, but here it's even more direct. It starts out like a slasher and then it goes supernatural, then there are monsters and all kinds of stuff. I got to do a bit of everything."

Sandberg found himself surprised by how much he enjoyed making what amounts to almost short films in these different subgenres, particularly the slasher section – despite never having previously wanted to make a slasher. "Then there was the found footage stuff that I found myself enjoying a lot because it was so simple, doing those found footage beats, hiding cuts with whip pans," he says. "It's made me appreciate certain genres more, and then made me think, 'I should do more of that!'"

Dauberman adds that the likes of David Cronenberg and the *Conjuring* universe (Dauberman and Sandberg previously directed *Annabelle Comes Home* and *Annabelle: Creation*, respectively) inspired several scenes. "I wrote this prior to seeing *The Substance*, but I was already playing around with body horror, because I've always been a fan of that and never been able to do that before."

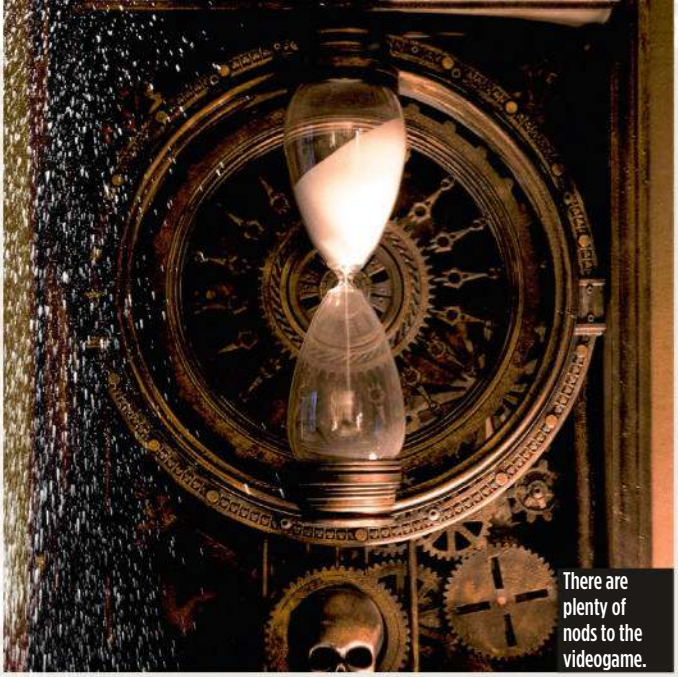
Encompassing so many genres of horror gave the filmmakers an excuse to play around with practical effects rather than CGI, especially when it came to gore. "I wanted to try and take practical effects as far as we could," Sandberg says. "I don't hate CGI, but it's always been a dream to do a horror movie that way. I understand why most movies aren't made that way anymore, because it really messes up your schedule, and you only get one chance to do things. If you get blood everywhere, resetting that takes forever. Certain things we had to save until the end of the shoot when it was okay to destroy the set with blood. It's hard to go back from that. But [with practical effects], you appreciate that it was actually there."

Sandberg had particular fun bringing the game's Wendigos to life, though they proved challenging to do practically. "In the game, the Wendigos have extremely long limbs. So we tried to find the skinniest, tallest people; these dancers who know how to move their bodies like that." The Psycho, a crazed killer with a haunting white mask, also makes the leap from the game to the big screen. "Psycho was great," Sandberg says. "We had this Hungarian guy, and he was awesome. He was up for anything."

The director says that originally they discussed filming the entire production on soundstages, building a cabin and the woods around it, thereby giving them complete control over lighting and smoke. It would have also meant they didn't need to do night shoots.

"But then when we were in Budapest, looking at stage spaces, I felt like it's just going to feel too cramped and not real, and we're gonna have to VFX so many set extensions," he says. "So it was while we were there, pretty late in the game, that I said, 'No, we have to do it the old-fashioned way, shoot it out in the woods at night', and that's what we did."

PICTURES: KERRY BROWN/SCREEN GEMS, INC. & TSG ENTERTAINMENT II; STOCK IMAGES: JOSE A. BERNAT BACETE/GETTY



There are plenty of nods to the videogame.

Ji-young Yoo plays one of the unlucky protagonists.

It's the disappearance of Clover (Ella Rubin)'s sister that kick-starts the narrative.

MESSY BUSINESS

Heading out required Sandberg and Dauberman to find actors who did not mind getting dirty. Leading the cast is Ella Rubin (Netflix's *The Chair*), who plays Clover, a young woman whose sister Melanie, played by Maia Mitchell (*Good Trouble, The Artful Dodger*), mysteriously went missing after a trip to the cabin. Clover's determined to discover what happened, and brings along friends portrayed by Michael Cimino (*Love, Victor*), Odessa A'zion (*Hellraiser*), Ji-young Yoo (*Freaky Tales*), and Belmont Cameli (*Saved By The Bell*).

"I really liked the idea of Clover's group of friends rallying behind her in order to help find the friend they all knew before the trauma happened, for them to help her confront the trauma and bring some closure to events in her life," Dauberman says. "They're a close-knit group. They see themselves as their chosen family. They're all different personalities that reflect different aspects of Clover."

"We tried to make it feel like they would all actually hang out together," Sandberg adds. "We don't go too much into the cliches of horror groups, where you have the nerd and the jock."

"Ella had the difficult task of being the one who's going through the traumatic stuff," Dauberman continues. "It's like, 'How do you balance the playfulness with knowing that you're going through this heavy stuff and not dragging the movie down?' She balanced that wonderfully. It's not an easy gig, being the lead in a horror movie, because there are a lot of nights and you're getting literally dragged through the mud and covered in blood and guts and screaming constantly. She did it all with good humour and great energy."

"They all really went through it," Sandberg says. "It was a challenging shoot for everyone, not just nights, but shooting in these tunnels under Budapest that have been there for hundreds of years. It was the perfect setting, but it was miserable down there. It was so cold, we all got sick. It was a real challenge. But the fun thing was that they did also really enjoy it. Maia [Mitchell] was saying she's so used to playing pretty and beautiful and always being perfect, but here, you're bloody and dirty and get to scream."

Although the main group are all new characters, rather than being recasts of Malek and Panettiere's Josh and Sam from the game, there is one familiar face: Peter Stormare returns as the mysterious psychologist Dr Hill. "He's the same character, but his focus is on a different set of characters," confirms Dauberman, saying his inclusion felt "organic" to the story. Sandberg elaborates: "[Stormare] knows that character. He has such a unique flair in his acting, you always get these weird little things he does that just make everything so memorable. I just let him do his thing."

Sandberg clarifies that *Until Dawn*, the game, and *Until Dawn*, the movie, are two different stories in a shared universe – though this approach has been somewhat controversial online. There are gamers who wanted to see their favourite characters brought to life. "If you do exactly the same thing as the game, then what's the point?" Sandberg responds. "This is the more interesting way [of adapting the game] because the game still exists. The movie's more like an extension of *Until Dawn*, rather than redoing *Until Dawn*, which I think is the right way to go."

"I feel really strongly that if I wanted to watch the game, I would put on YouTube and watch a playthrough," Dauberman says. "Who would we get to play Rami Malek in the movie version? What's wrong with presenting a new experience within the universe? As a fan, that's what I wanted to see. We didn't just completely do its own thing and slap the title *Until Dawn* on it. We had the idea of making Peter Stormare the face of the franchise, making Dr Hill that connective thread that can weave itself through the different movies and media. He's such a mysterious character. I love Tony Todd in the *Final Destination* movies. That was an inspiration for it."

> **"How cool would it be if every time you start over, you find yourself in a different horror movie?"**

Could this be just the beginning of the *Until Dawn* Expanded Universe? "I don't know what the future holds, but it's such a nice concept, you could easily do more of these in different horror genres," Sandberg says. Dauberman is a little more direct: "Fuck, I want another game! I think there's more story to be explored and more subgenres to exploit, but I hope there's at least another game. And if there's another game, maybe there's another movie..."

Until Dawn is in cinemas from 25 April.

THE FINAL GIRLS

DIRECTOR MATT PALMER GETS TO HACK AND SLASH THE "IT GIRLS" OF SHADYSIDE HIGH SCHOOL IN FEAR STREET: PROM QUEEN

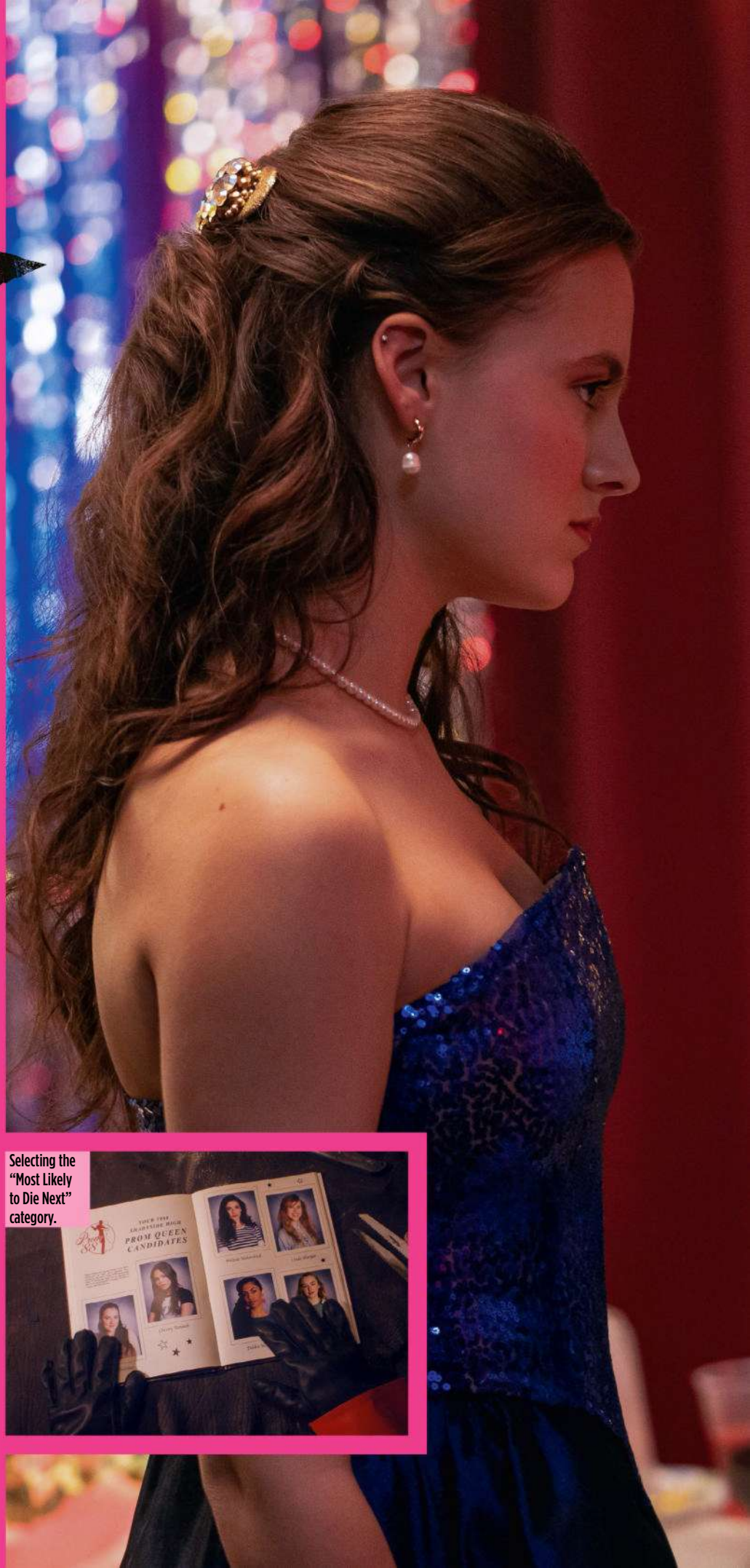
WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

FOUR YEARS AFTER NETFLIX released its trilogy of *Fear Street* horror films based on teen horror author RL Stine's massively popular book series, the latest chapter is the standalone *Fear Street: Prom Queen*.

Loosely inspired by Stine's 1992 book of the same name, this latest tale of teen woe is set in Stine's 'burb of Shadyside in 1988. Co-written by Donald McLeary and writer/director Matt Palmer, it dives into the social politics of the race to win the title of Shadyside High's prom queen. While the "It Girls" squabble among themselves to win votes, an outsider throws herself into the ring, upsetting the status quo. Then the other nominees begin to disappear one by one.

Palmer tells *SFX* that as the curator of Edinburgh's "All Night Horror Madness" film festival since 2010, he's an aficionado of slasher cinema and had been actively looking for a way to put a new spin on one of his favourites, *Happy Birthday To Me* (1981). Then the producers of the *Fear Street* series approached him for his thoughts on what Stine book he might tackle.

"I got sent 10 synopses of books that the producers thought would make interesting adaptions, and I just zeroed straight into *Prom Queen*," Palmers remembers. "It's one of those synopses that you hear and you just like, 'Wow, that's an exciting premise for a movie.' It had that high concept thing Spielberg talked about, where you can hold the idea in your hand."



Selecting the "Most Likely to Die Next" category.

PICTURES: ALAN MARKFIELD/NETFLIX

Fina Strazza as Tiffany and India Fowler as Lori.

"Quick, throw me all your money! You don't need it."

He says his brief was to write a slasher movie, but with characters that you genuinely care about. "Not just in a tokenistic way but ones you actually care about, particularly the two lead characters," he explains. "It gets you a lot more invested in it. But then, by the same token, we're also completely aware from the beginning that it was very clear that in a slasher movie, there's an expectation that people are going to die, and they're going to die in ways that are surprising and a bit shocking.

"One of the things that's appealing about slasher movies is there's just a basic mechanism to them that's extremely crowd-pleasing and very visceral. In a slasher movie, somebody might die at any moment, immediately. So we put an awful lot of work into deciding how we would kill people. We've tried to keep the viewer a little wrong-footed in terms of direction. But it's very gory."

One thing Palmer says was freeing about working in Stine's universe is that the author's happy for others to play in his creative sandbox, something backed up by the film's producers. "They're open to people bringing their own vision, rather than a one-size-fits-all 'This is what we do in the franchise [attitude]'" he explains.

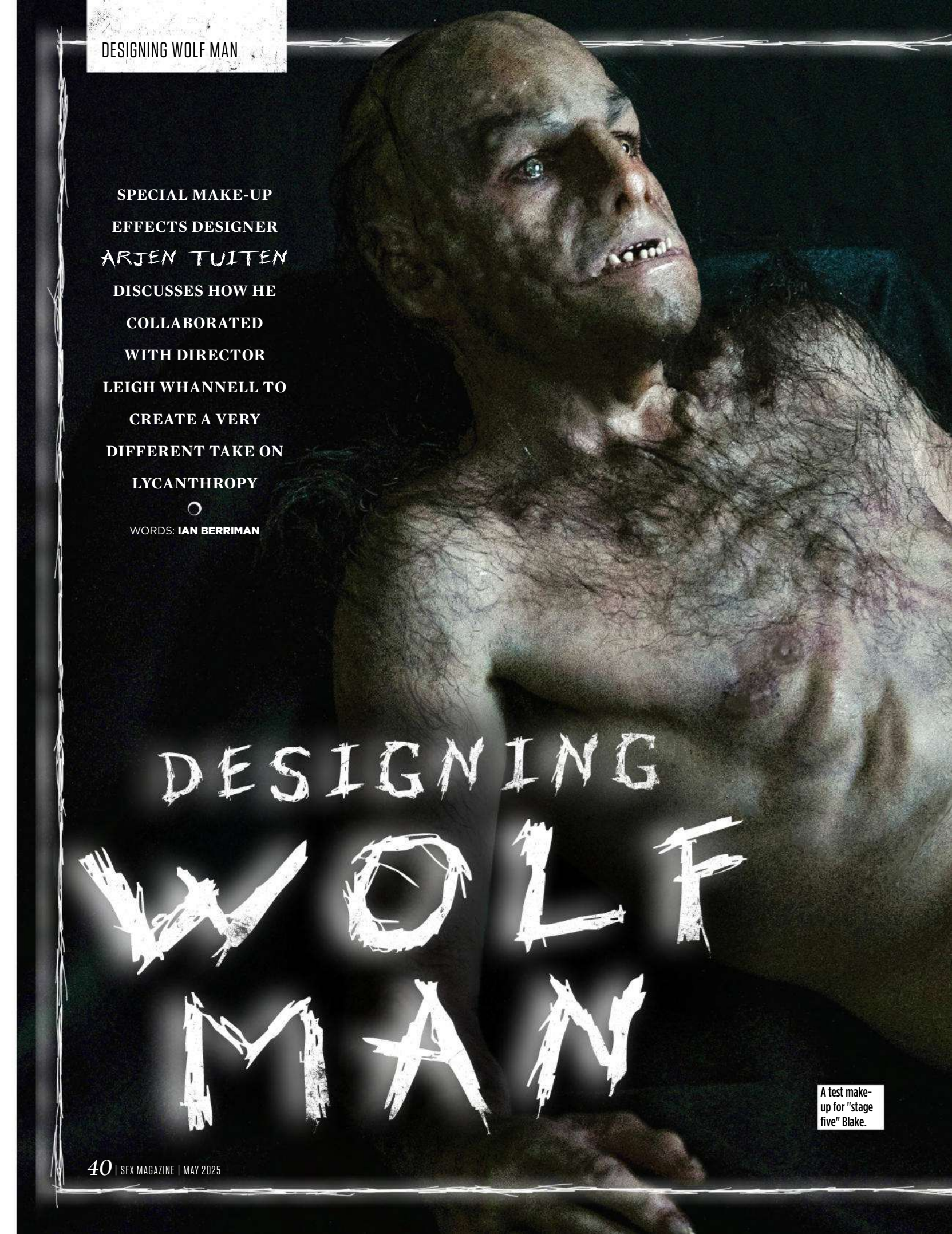
As such, they played around with the now-often used aesthetics of '80s-centred stories to mix it up a bit. "The world of *Fear Street* and Shadyside is not the glittery, everyone's happy, everyone's got big hair, everyone's wearing leotards '80s," he emphasises. "There's an element of that and things that people in Shadyside would aspire to, but there's also a rougher edge to it. We haven't leaned into the stereotypical movie/TV '80s, if you like. There's loads of needle drops and '80s stuff. But it's a little bit more of a lived-in '80s than people might be used to seeing."

> **"We've tried to keep the viewer a little wrong-footed in terms of direction"**

Palmer says their casting director, Carmen Cuba, also concentrated on finding the right actresses from today who would seamlessly fit into a period piece. "There's definitely some actresses who feel like they have a more modern style of acting, and I didn't really realise this until we got the cast together," he explains. "We were doing read-throughs and there's a certain timeless quality to all of the actresses whose direction she led me in. Just out of the box, they were great."

Palmer says '80s acting is often slightly more theatrical, and he wanted to avoid that. "One thing I didn't want the film to have is a knowing quality," he says. "The characters don't know that they're in a slasher movie, and the cast just knocked it out of the park."

Fear Street: Prom Queen is on Netflix from 23 May.



DESIGNING WOLF MAN

SPECIAL MAKE-UP EFFECTS DESIGNER ARJEN TUITEN DISCUSSES HOW HE COLLABORATED WITH DIRECTOR LEIGH WHANNELL TO CREATE A VERY DIFFERENT TAKE ON LYCANTHROPY

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

A test make-up for "stage five" Blake.

WHEN SFX connects with Arjen Tuiten via Zoom, it's immediately clear that he's a fan of '30s and '40s horror, as a sinister figure is looming over his left shoulder... "Oh yeah, that's Lon Chaney," the make-up effects designer says. "That's an oil painting I did many years ago." There are similar portraits on display at his effects studio, Arjen LLC. "I have a few drawings I did maybe 20 years ago. One is Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, and we have [*Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* star] Fredric March upstairs in the sculpting room." Tuiten then turns his laptop to the right, revealing a portrait on the opposite wall: Boris Karloff as Ardath Bey (aka Imhotep) in 1932's *The Mummy*. The week we speak, he's working on test make-ups for a new take on that very story, directed by *Evil Dead Rise*'s Lee Cronin. But today, our subject is his work on another contemporary update of a Universal horror classic: Leigh Whannell's *Wolf Man*.

REALITY BITES

"When we first started talking, Leigh brought up the idea of how it's all really grounded in reality. 'I don't want to see anything fantastical' – he was very adamant about that. He said, 'My frustration in the last few years developing it, talking to designers, is that a lot of people are doing the same thing, which is the classic look of a Wolf Man. That's not what I want.' Then he mentioned David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, and that it wasn't necessarily a fantastical transformation, but a slow one, and more like two anatomies trying to mix. So it doesn't really become a full-blown creature; it's more a dog or wolf anatomy trying to mix with a human. He said, 'Whatever was done in the past, don't look at any of it. Keep it as a disease.'"

BLAKE'S FIVE

"There are five stages on Blake and Christopher [Abbott, actor] – all separate sculpts, separate builds, because everything needed to be in-camera. That little maquette of when he's on the floor [see below] is actually about 12" long. That's the sculpture that got me the movie – that was my first concept for Leigh, based on what he had told me. We didn't know yet who the actor was going to be, so it's just a generic idea, but Leigh absolutely loved it. He said, 'I've tried to find this for so long, and you captured it.' I don't know if many people picked up on it, but I never designed Blake with a final look in mind, because he doesn't make it. If he'd lived through the morning and didn't get killed, he would have kept transforming. That was the idea."

The 12" by 7" maquette that got Tuiten the gig.

Arjen Tuiten hard at work on a sculpt. Spot the teeth.

Sculpts for stages one to four of Blake's evolution.

STRIKING A BLOW

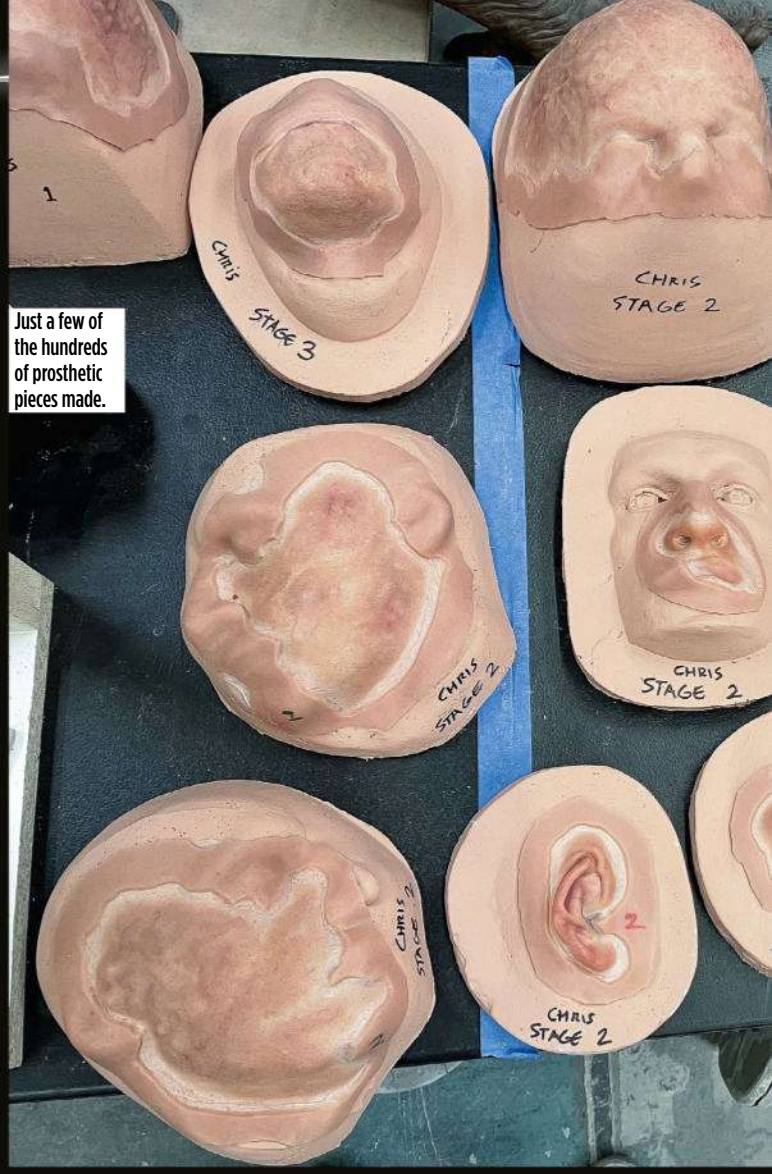
"The actors' strike cut our build time in half. Production wasn't allowed to officially cast Christopher, so we couldn't live-cast and scan him. That was frustrating, because I saw the weeks on the calendar going. On top of that, we were shooting in New Zealand, so you have to calculate shipping times. I had almost 30 people in the shop trying to get it done on time, from hairpieces to sculptures to mouldmaking to dentures. Blake alone, that's five different builds. On top of that, we had another two full builds. That's a lot of work. I was tired when I arrived in New Zealand. I got very sick just because of pure exhaustion."

NOTES ON A SCAN

"We actually scanned Chris's full body, face and hands – everything – and then we also did a traditional life cast, just in case. I knew we had very little time, so I wanted to make sure we were covered on both ends. And we actually used both – we used the scan and the traditional life cast. Scanning is really good these days, but Chris wasn't able to travel, as he had just had knee surgery by the time he got cast, and we had to go to New York. I wasn't sure about the local scanning places when it came to detail, and therefore I opted to do the scanning, but also to do the traditional life cast, just because we couldn't lose any time, really."

Painter Jack Currier hard at work. Cool earring, dude.

Brian Goehring moulds a hand. Spot the Slimer!



Just a few of the hundreds of prosthetic pieces made.

THE MAKING OF A MAN

"The make-ups are broken down in different sections of prosthetic – it's not one big mask you pull over. We had chest prosthetics. We had pull-on, silicone custom-made feet for him. And the hands are all different sculptures – they were basically a piece that goes up to the elbow. Some of it got lost in the film, because it's quite dark. But we had many different versions of sculptures, and they all had to be moulded and cast. You have to make positives, then you have to finish the sculpture on top of the positive, and detail it all. Then you have to negative mould that, clean it out and cast a rubber silicone in it. I think we ran close to 750 or 800 prosthetics."

Mouldmakers TJ Loza and Jim McCloughlin.

Thankfully, Abbott didn't have dialogue by this point...

DENTAL PLAN

"I'm picky about teeth, so I built those myself. Again, because everything had to be in-camera, every time we saw Chris [in a new stage], his teeth changed slightly. We did a dental cast, then they're all different dentures that he wears. I knew that after stage two of the make-up, where he's in the truck and they start trying to leave the farm, that's when Blake loses his speech. So I took that as an advantage on my side to push the teeth a little further, because I knew he wouldn't have much dialogue. Chris actually told me that he was very interested in the part because of that, because it was so silent in places. He saw it more as a form of body art, which I thought was a good approach."

Five sets of increasingly British nashers.

THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

"[Make-up effects great] Rick Baker is a close friend of mine, and he owns the case that Jack Pierce actually made Lon Chaney Jr up with in 1941 [for *The Wolf Man*]. I told Rick about the film and said, 'You did the last [Wolf Man film] in 2010, and this is going to be different, but I hope I get Jack's blessing. And I would love to borrow the case.' So I had it sitting in my office during the build of our wolf, for good mojo. I don't know if you noticed, but there's a little shout out to Jack in the film: on the side of the moving truck it says 'Pierce Truck Rental, getting a move on since 1941.'"

Jack Pierce (right) gets a little shout-out (above).

Christopher Abbott bares his teeth in the final film.

UNIVERSAL/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK (1)

MONK TIME

"When I first met Chris, I wasn't sure if he was fully aware of the amount of hours he was going to be in the make-up chair. I knew he's an amazing actor, but he'd never gone through anything of this extent in make-up. It lasted anywhere from two and a half hours in the first stage – when he's in the basement with the pockmarked face – all the way up to stage five, which is easily six hours. He went in monk mode, basically. I have to say, looking back, he was one of the best to work with on that. I know that's kind of a cliché to say in the press, but he was absolutely amazing; he really embraced it."

HIRSUTE YOU, SIR

"Though the talk online is there's no hair, there's actually quite a lot, especially on his body. It was a combination of hand-tied pieces, lace sections, but also a lot of pre-laid hair laying. It's pre-laid on a body form, which we carefully removed and then reapplied on the day. I would cut some hair, then hand-lay some of the hair, rather than having a lace piece, just so we don't have to deal with lace popping off. That's what Aimee [Macabeo, hair supervisor] was preparing there. We actually had several lovely ladies working on that to get all those sets ready, because you can only use them once – you have to throw them out at the end of the day."

A sculpt for Grady's foot. Note the extra dewclaw.

DADDY ISSUES

"In the beginning, I did more passes of Grady, Blake's father, because if he'd gone missing for the last 30 years, as he is in the story, in my mind he would have transformed a lot further. So I did passes with a lot more hair, but Leigh was adamant not to do that – he asked me to remove that and go with less hair, and keep more human. That was one thing he was very, very strong on. I also pushed his claws a little. So we did Grady as a full creature, and we actually did an opening creature in 1995, the year that the movie starts. We did a full different creature for that, which was even further along, but it was cut from the film."

A first-day camera test for the Grady Wolf make-up.

Bela Lugosi keeps an eye on Aimee Macabeo.

Sculptor Leland Stewart works on Grady's hands.

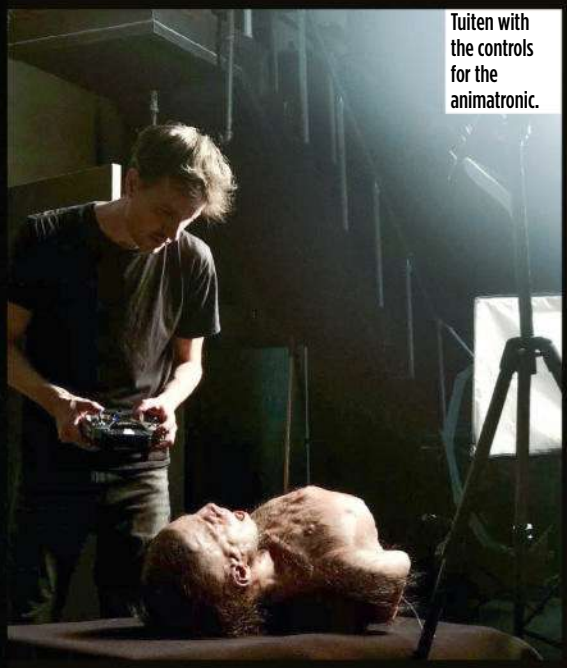
The sculpts for Grady's clawed mitts.

BEHIND THE SCENES IMAGES © ARJEN, LLC

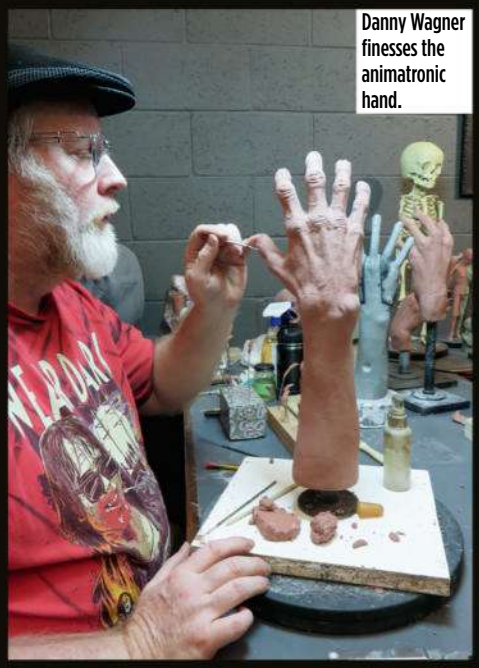
Bill Sturgeon designed these inner mechanics.

JAW BREAKER

"I think Leigh was already cutting the film, and felt we needed something beyond human in the moment where Blake's outside the farm, on the ground, and going from stage three make-up into stage four. That's where he really turns on his family, where his wife locks him out. Leigh felt he needed some moments that we simply couldn't do with Christopher, because we'd wrapped, but he didn't want it to be digital, so he requested that it be practical. It's the moment where Blake shoves his jaw aside. We built an animatronic hand and head – because the nails pop out – beautifully designed by Bill Sturgeon, who actually worked on *An American Werewolf In London* with Rick Baker back in the day. We shot that here in town, in post-production, for a day or two."



Tuiten with the controls for the animatronic.



Danny Wagner finesses the animatronic hand.

Mario Torres and an unused earlier version of Grady.

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

"Sometimes, films just don't land right, and I've gotten a lot of bricks thrown at me for *Wolf Man*! Seeing all the reactions online, we were quite taken aback by it, really. But I hope the movie gets a reappraisal in the coming years, and gets a little bit more appreciation for what it actually is – that over time, people will maybe look back at it with a different eye and go, 'Actually, that was kind of cool.' I mean, the reality is, if we'd done something more classic – which I would have been totally open to – I think the headline would have been, 'Why can't they do anything new?' There's only so many ways you can go!

Wolf Man is available to buy on 4K, Blu-ray and DVD now.

FEAR THE DEER

BAMBI BITES BACK IN A NEW HORROR REIMAGINING

WORDS:
ROBBIE DUNLOP

BAMBI: THE RECKONING, the fourth instalment in Jagged Edge's Twisted Childhood Universe, eschews the campy fun of *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2* and the gory excesses of *Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare*. Instead, it favours a moodier tone that reflects its source material, author Felix Salten's 1923 novel *Bambi, A Life In The Woods*.

"At the time of publication it was considered a horror book, in a way," explains director Dan Allen. "It's steeped in atmosphere and it's very dark. And, of course, it's sad at the same time," he adds, referring to Bambi's loss of his mother.

Allen, also the editor of *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2*, was drawn to the project because he enjoys "soppy, sentimental stories. I love horror films that have real emotional hearts – films that challenge your characters emotionally as well as physically. So I was excited to make sure that this was that as well."

Ultimately, he wanted to make a film about the death of childhood, which he believes is "incredibly pertinent" for a Twisted Childhood Universe movie. "So often, these films have been called 'childhood killers'; I think that is a bit extreme. But to actually engage with it on a narrative level and have a movie that is thematically about the loss of innocence and the death of childhood makes this really quite faithful to the heart of it.

"I genuinely think that, in many ways, these adaptations are more faithful than the Disney films," he adds. "Probably not with *Winnie-The-Pooh*, but in terms of *Peter Pan* and *Bambi*. They are actually pretty dark stories! Disney made them much more palatable and friendly to young audiences."

Writer Rhys Warrington picks up from the novel (which is now in the public domain) with Bambi having become "rabid and crazy" after consuming dumped chemicals. Allen teases, "But there is more to that than it seems."

Elsewhere, Xana (Roxanne McKee) and her son Benji (Tom Mulheron) are going to Benji's father's house. However, their journey takes a terrifying pit stop near the Hundred Acre Wood, when they are intercepted by the bloodthirsty deer. "The family must try to escape his rampage while also getting wrapped up in a slightly broader plot," says Allen.

ON THE HOOF

"Wrapped up" is also how Allen spent much of the 15-night shoot in Wilding Wood, East Sussex. He laughs, saying, "The crew members will tell you it was one of the worst shoots they've ever done in their lives. It was January [2024] and -3°C for much of it, and quite muddy too, depending on where you went."

He acknowledges that, with half the budget allocated to CGI, they were limited in terms of practical effects compared to previous Twisted Childhood Universe movies. "But we still managed to do some really cool gore and horror sequences that will make people cringe and feel very uncomfortable," he continues, citing a moment when Bambi mauls a taxi driver. "We had a fake arm made for that, and we got to sort of crunch it and snap it and have blood coming out of it, which was pretty cool."

> **"A movie that is thematically about the loss of innocence and the death of childhood"**

While Bambi is computer-generated, the cast members were aided in their interactions by some stand-in props. For instance, a green-coloured hoof was pressed on an actor's back, then replaced by CGI in post-production.

"I think it's a giveaway in cheap CGI films where characters end up just lying on the ground flailing and you don't really feel like the creature is there," Allen says. "We wanted to make it feel real and grounded."

He likens the horror elements to "an R-rated *Jurassic Park*. You're still going to get that violence; you're still going to get the gore, but not at *Peter Pan* level. It's more about the build-up to it; that's where it finds its fun and energy – with loads of destruction as well."

Allen says the team at Jagged Edge is aware of how their output might be perceived. "They might be like, 'Oh, that's a B-movie' – *Winnie-The-Pooh* and stuff – but none of us consider ourselves B-movie filmmakers. We might like doing fun stuff in our movies, but we very much consider ourselves A-movie filmmakers, just working on indie budgets. We always just try to make the best film possible – I never do a film unless I can give it 120%, genuinely."

While Allen contemplates the possibility of directing a sequel ("We'll see – I've got to feel like I can do something new, exciting," he tells us), the deer of fear will return in next year's *Avengers*-esque heroes vs villains showdown, *Poohniverse*. "It's really exciting that it's all heading towards something," he says. "I know we're not post-Marvel, but it feels more like a post-Marvel world in that way. I think the horror world now has its own version, which is really nice."

Bambi: The Reckoning is released this summer.

A wood in East Sussex was the location...

© ITN STUDIOS/JAGGED EDGE PRODUCTIONS

...But Bambi is computer-generated.

Hunters? We're with Bambi here.

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD

GROUP THERAPY

OUTCASTS ASSEMBLE! MARVEL'S MOST DYSFUNCTIONAL HEROES ARE HERE TO SAVE THE WORLD – AND MAYBE THEMSELVES – IN THUNDERBOLTS*.

© DISNEY/MARVEL TCD/PROD.DB/ALAMY

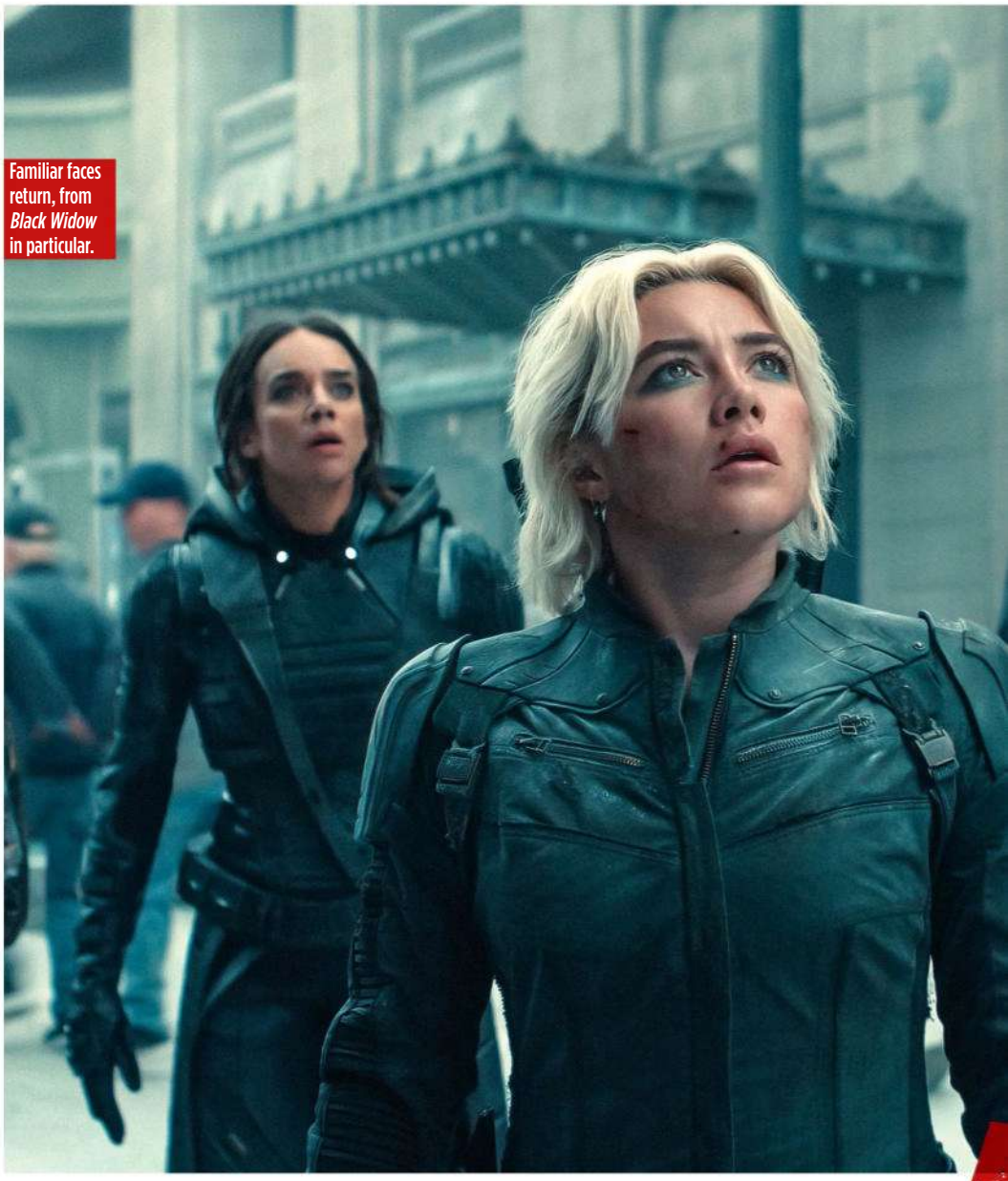
AS ANYONE INVOLVED IN THE MCU discovers, there's an essential truth when it comes to comics fandom. Every title, every issue, every polybagged piece of paper history is a sacred text to somebody.

"I'm aware of people being like, 'They didn't do *the thing*!'" smiles Jake Schreier, director of *Thunderbolts**. "They didn't do *the thing* from the first one!"

Yes, *Thunderbolts** doesn't just append a cryptic asterisk to Marvel's most morally dubious supergroup, this big-screen iteration dares to tell an altogether different origin story than the one enshrined on the comic book page and familiar to long-term fans. Gone is the key twist of a bunch of supervillains duping the world by masquerading as do-gooders, only to be exposed as the rascally Masters of Evil (that's *the thing*, by the way, not to be confused with the Thing, who definitely makes it to the screen in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* this summer).

"We love those comics," Schreier tells *SFX*, keen to reassure us that the tricksy spirit of that debut story is intact. "When people see the film they will see that [Marvel supremo] Kevin Feige's pretty smart about this stuff, and there's a way that we honoured that initial idea, that this team is not what you expect them to be.

"It's the idea of these morally grey characters, where theoretically they're villains but then they get to live what it's like to be a hero for a bit, and grapple with whether that is, in fact, enticing. That greyness is really where we found our connection. One thing that Kevin is good at is not just giving you what you expect, but taking the kernel of that idea and expanding it into something that feels different when it's in the MCU. I hope we've done that."



Familiar faces return, from *Black Widow* in particular.

TEAM BUILDING

These cinematic Thunderbolts are certainly no shining beacons of nobility. In fact they're a ragbag assortment of reprobates, outcasts and failures that leave the Guardians of the Galaxy looking like the upstanding Avengers. They're damaged souls, for all their powers. Bad seeds looking for redemption.

"These aren't just misfits from the start," clarifies Schreier. "They're people who thought they were going to be something, and maybe that didn't work out for them. What would it be like to put a group of those people together, especially in a situation where none of them could trust each other, and see if that trust could be formed?"

Assembled by Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) – herself no stranger to shady behaviour – the dysfunctional roster includes Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), Natasha Romanoff's equally lethal kid sister, paired again with her adoptive father,

Bucky's got a heavy task on his hands.

A multiversal truth: never trust the CIA.

> "Theoretically they're villains, but then they get to live with what it's like to be a hero"

over-the-hill Soviet super trooper the Red Guardian (David Harbour). Joining them are disgraced uber-patriot John Walker (Wyatt Russell), slinging a shield alongside Black Widow's Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko), whose uncanny reflexes allow her to mimic the combat skills of any opponent, and the phantasmic Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen), last seen in 2018's *Ant-Man And The Wasp*. Looking to keep this chaotic brigade together is Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), former sidekick to Steve Rogers and latterly brainwashed Hydra super-weapon, complete with cybernetic arm.

Seriously, who ya gonna call?

"I think there was a point during pitching when I really wanted Man-Thing to be on the

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team," laughs Schreier, "but Giacchino got there first [Michael Giacchino directed 2022 TV special *Werewolf By Night*, which introduced the legendary swamp-beast to the MCU]. But it all worked out for the best.

"It was about looking through the MCU and not just finding bad guys who could be good but characters that exist more on that morally grey plane or who were potentially destined for something else but then something went awry. Or maybe they're just misunderstood, someone like John Walker, where he was literally Captain America.

"With someone like Yelena, especially in our movie we've leaned a little more into some of that past trauma and the depression she might experience because of it. There's a very caustic nature in how she approaches that, a sense that maybe nothing matters. Then it's like, well, maybe something has to matter. Maybe there is something that is worth caring about. I think all of them have kind of lost touch with that idea. At first through sheer necessity, because of the situation that they're thrown into together, but then later more out of inspiration, as a group could they become something bigger than each of themselves could be on their own?"

The precise circumstances that unite these tarnished outsiders – inevitably framed as Marvel's answer to DC's Suicide Squad – are still on the classified list. But we do know the Thunderbolts would be wise not to trust Valentina. Now ensconced in what was once Avengers Tower, the conniving queen of the CIA brings her own agenda, as ever, one that may well prove injurious to the health of the very team she's put together.

"They're in a situation where they genuinely need each other," Schreier tells *SFX*. "Not necessarily in an emotional sense to begin →

HEROES AND VILLAINS

Thunderbolts in the comics

1 Created by Kurt Busiek and Mark Bagley, the team first appeared in *The Incredible Hulk* 449, dated January 1997. They promised to protect the world after the fall of the Avengers in the Onslaught crossover.

2 In April 1997 the final page of *Thunderbolts* 1 revealed that they were really supervillains in disguise, assembled by Captain America's old nemesis Baron Zemo.

3 Zemo's scheme was to access the secrets of the Avengers and SHIELD and sell them to the underworld's highest bidder. And maybe deliver a killer "Gotcha!" to the entire planet.

4 The original team of villains-in-disguise included Citizen V (Baron Zemo), Mach-1 (The Beetle), Techno (Fixer), Atlas (Goliath), Songbird (Screaming Mimi) and Meteorite (Moonstone).

5 Subsequent incarnations of the team were created by Norman Osborn, the Winter Soldier, the Red Hulk and Wilson Fisk AKA the Kingpin, who claimed to own the copyright on the name.

6 Deadpool joined the team's sixth incarnation.

7 The *Thunderbolts* comic was renamed *Dark Avengers* from issue 175.

8 In *Wolverine: Days Of Future Past* the Thunderbolts work for the Sentinels.

9 Every team member in the movie has been a Thunderbolt in print.

© MARVEL

Can the team members learn to trust each other?

The team wonder how they got roped into this.

with, but they literally need each other to get out of the situation that they're in. If you think of the film just from a dynamic perspective, like *Ronin* or even in *Reservoir Dogs*, where it's people that aren't the most trustworthy and have no real reason to trust each other but are forced to, there's a tension to that dynamic that drives it. Then when you've been through those experiences with each other and you start to find these points of connection, which we find along with them along the way, that is what bonds them together as a group."

SURREAL DEAL

Schreier relishes the chance to explore the interpersonal when it comes to this misfit crew. With a background in such quirky, emotionally-loaded dramas as *Robot & Frank* and *Paper Towns*, he pitched for *Thunderbolts** after near-misses with *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Kevin Feige brought him into the MCU with a mandate to "make it something different". So just how would he quantify that difference?

"Here goes another inevitable dash of pretension," laughs Schreier. "It just meant tell a more human story and to tell it in a more human way and really embrace practical effects. It's weird to be on a Marvel movie and be doing like match-cut, head-turn transitions in and out of surrealist spaces, but we did it.

"We're building these surrealistic rooms that have walls that are just walls, that aren't relying on post effects to tell that story. I sort of assumed when I came in that at some point I'd see some CG representation of the thing and Kevin was like, 'No, don't do this. Just keep it here. Keep it small, keep it interior.' It was just so nice to have that push, to embrace these techniques that I've been using my whole career. Not that I invented them. There are references to Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry, trying to bring some of that practical nature to the way the film is made."

Does its tone match previous Marvel entries, or does *Thunderbolts** feel as much of an outlier as its protagonists? "We always wanted it to be both. We wanted it to feel very different at the start and then at some point for it to turn and be like, in a way, from a different angle, this achieves on the same level as these great movies we've come to expect from Marvel.

"There is a different tone. And I think that tone comes from our great team of writers and these actors who brought so much of themselves to it. It's easy to always say, 'Well, our humour comes from character,' and that's certainly been true of other great Marvel movies, but there is a different voice to this one that hopefully feels unique to start with and still builds up to something that feels, in a way, reminiscent of some of the best stories that they've told."

*Thunderbolts** also feels more of a stealth entry in the MCU, arriving on our screens with none of the internet-quaking weight of fan expectation that accompanies a new Avengers or Spider-Man movie. For Schreier, that is a creative advantage.

"That's what felt so nice about this one. Because it's a bit more off the map, it felt like there was a lot of freedom to tell a smaller story that eventually becomes quite large. But for a lot of the movie you're in your own corner of the universe and you can work within that with a lot of freedom. I hope people come and I hope they are looking for something new and I hope that we can give that to them."

While the premise of *Thunderbolts** was initially seeded in *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*, the presence of Yelena, the Red Guardian and Taskmaster from 2021's *Black Widow* – along with an executive producer credit for Scarlett Johansson – suggests this is a movie very much concerned with the legacy of the late Avenger.

> "There is a different voice to this one that hopefully feels unique to start with"

"Without giving away too much, a lot of what David and Florence are working with as material in this movie relates to that past relationship," Schreier acknowledges. "And there's resonance to that, so I think it's important to everyone to preserve that legacy of something that emotionally meant so much to people, and make sure that we refer to that in the right way, and we protect it and make sure that it means something."

Is it pulling threads from that film in particular? "I think we're pulling from all of

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Revelations remain – Bob is still enigmatic.

their histories and then trying to tell something new. I don't think that it feels like a *Black Widow* sequel. I think it feels like it's a sampling of people from different parts [of this universe]. It's definitely a part of our story but it's not the driving force that leads into this film."

BUILDING BLOCKS

So just what is that driving force? There are clues. One key character on the cast list is a mysterious amnesiac called Bob, played by *Top Gun: Maverick*'s Lewis Pullman. Informed speculation pegs him as Robert Reynolds, alias the Sentry, one of the more intriguing characters in the Marvel back-catalogue.

Introduced in the comics in 2000, the Sentry was revealed as a founding figure of the superheroic age whose presence was wiped from the memory of the world. Possessing the "power of one million exploding suns", he also contains a malevolent alter ego, the Void.

"He obviously is a linchpin for the whole story," says Schreier of the enigmatic Bob, a lost soul who bonds with Yelena. "What he's going through and what Yelena is going through, connecting those two characters is essential to what the movie is about.

The past still looms large for some.

"Obviously there are other themes that connect all of the characters in the film but that relationship is quite central. It was such a great opportunity for Lewis, and so fun to build that character with him because it has so many sides and so many different places that it goes, and all of them have to work in order to tell the story. I think he pulls it off beautifully."

Right now the hype is building for next year's *Avengers: Doomsday*, a star-stuffed ensemble piece set to shake the very reality of the MCU. Is *Thunderbolts** a stepping stone towards that particular juggernaut?

"There might be some stones, or pebbles," smiles Schreier. "I don't know how you want to rate your rocks. Look, you know the character that we're talking about, and you know that there's a level of power involved there that could have an impact going forward. I'm not making *Doomsday* so I'm not privy to that.

"I know our characters don't, on the surface, seem like the most powerful in the universe, but in the end what's made these movies so great is the people who inhabit them, and what they're going through and how they work as characters, more than the power sets. I believe that once people see the film they're going to want to continue on that journey with them."

*Thunderbolts** arrives in a darker, more conflicted world than the one that birthed the MCU in 2008. Thirty-six movies on, do these adventures have a duty to reflect our times or should they simply offer people a welcome shot of escapism?

"I don't think we did anything overt to relate to the times that we're in," says Schreier. "If you're making movies and you're trying to be honest to who the characters are and everyone's showing up to work every day then that's going to be part of what you make.

"We're not trying to do anything other than tell a story about people but that sense of how we're all feeling... When you talk about making a Marvel movie that has characters that are depressed in it, there might have been an era in which that seemed like a niche idea. I don't think that feeling down is a niche idea any more. That's something everyone can relate to and is actually quite a universal idea. And that's something we talked about quite a lot and tried to put into this film."

*Thunderbolts** *is in cinemas from 2 May.*

THE GREA CONTEST IN

"BEFORE MY *DOCTOR WHO* EXPERIENCE, I'D always wondered why Russell [T Davies] came back after 12 years away," Juno Dawson tells *SFX*. "Now I get it – because it's so much *fun*!"

An award-winning author and self-professed *Doctor Who* superfan (her first memory being Bonnie Langford trapped in a giant bubble in Sylvester McCoy's debut "Time And The Rani"), Dawson is eagerly anticipating 17 May. The date not only marks the 69th edition of the *Eurovision Song Contest* but also the premiere of her very first *Doctor Who* television episode. To celebrate, she's hired a pub. "Of *course* I've hired a pub," she laughs. "I might never get to write *Doctor Who* again!"

Dawson's journey to writing for the series began in bed. "Because Russell is a workhorse who doesn't seem to need →

TEST SONG THE GALAXY

FOR AUTHOR JUNO DAWSON, WRITING **DOCTOR WHO** WAS AN "ABSOLUTE DREAM"

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

Presenter Rylan Clark appears as himself.

sleep, he emailed me at about 1.30 in the morning," she recalls. "I didn't see it until my alarm went off at 7.00am. Like any modern person, the first I did was check my phone – like an addict. And I had this email saying, '*Die Hard* meets *Eurovision*. What do you think?'

"I handed the phone to my then-husband, and I was like, 'Am I imagining this?' He was just, 'Oh my god'. Like, the call had finally come! It was the easiest 'Yes' I've ever said," she adds, her excitement still clear.

From the outset, Dawson envisioned her episode as "a hostage situation at *Eurovision*." The real challenge, she admits, was figuring out how to combine those two elements, "because they don't fit together as easily as you might expect".

She initially pitched a Marvel-budgeted, *The Poseidon Adventure*-style story. "I look back now with a slight cringe," she laughs. "What was I thinking? It was very ambitious. The bare bones are still in the finished product but, god, in one version I had robots wearing lederhosen! They've gone!"

DAVIES ON DAWSON

"I'm quite sure we're sitting here in the era before Juno the showrunner emerges," Russell T Davies tells *SFX*, "which is doubtless on its way. She came to everything – she came to the edit, she came to the final mixes, she properly threw herself into the production process because she was so keen to learn – and did.

"I mean, if you want to learn TV production you could not hop on to madder or busier training than this one. You are literally learning everything: costume, design, effects, post, sound, everything. So she's thoroughly briefed! I love Juno, she's amazing."

Juno Dawson vamps it up on set. Well, you would.

SWEET HARMONY

After six months of developing the storyline, Dawson spent around a year working on the script. "With my background in copywriting, I've always written fast," she says. "I think I was the first to deliver a script for season two.

"But then, Russell took over and cast his editorial eye over it, which he does with every script. A few things changed. Some of it was practical, like, 'We're not going to be able to do that.' Some was character-related, because I had no idea what was going on in terms of the story arc."

What she appreciated most about the writing process was that no one at production company Bad Wolf tried to rein in her imagination. "Russell was very much, 'This is your chance to write *Doctor Who*. You've been waiting for this your whole life. What do you want in this episode?' So, we got anti-mavity scenes with the companion being pinned to the ceiling and floating through space – really ambitious stuff.

"I'm impressed with how Bad Wolf rose to the challenge," she adds.

Dawson's story is the sixth episode of season two and opens with the Doctor and Belinda arriving at the Harmony Arena – a space station-cum-stadium venue – just in time for the live broadcast of the 803rd Interstellar Song Contest (Why that specific number? "I pulled it out of my ass," Dawson says with a laugh.)

After centuries in suspended animation, Rylan Clark makes his long-awaited return as host. Dawson says they always hoped Rylan would be involved. She already knew the presenter personally, having met him during her *Eurovision* trips. His character was originally conceived as the blue-skinned Zylan, before Davies suggested Rylan play himself, believing it would be funnier. "And he was 100% right. It's absolutely funnier."

What happens then? Dawson reveals that just as the first act begins, "a dangerous insurgent named Kid [Freddie Fox] seizes control of the Arena and purges the entire auditorium into the frozen wasteland of outer space. It's up to the massacre's survivors to reclaim control of the station, as Kid "has an even greater master plan that could lead to the annihilation of the entire galaxy!"

Sounds like a blast! "It starts at 11, and it doesn't stop," she enthuses. "I love that about it."

With the two specific plot elements proposed by Davies, the storylining process could have been daunting. However, Dawson was more than prepared. She was familiar with *Die Hard* ("For me, it's the ultimate Christmas film") and was a dedicated Eurovision enthusiast, having attended numerous shows in person. "For queer people, there are certain things which really become part of your identity," she reflects on the song contest. "Growing up, it was absolutely part of my personality. It was *the* best night of the year. I even wrote a line for Belinda where she says, 'Best night of the year. My mum and dad used to let me watch and stay up late for the voting, as long as I got into my pyjamas.' And that was me – staying up until midnight to watch the voting. It was better than New Year's Eve."

When asked for her favourite *Eurovision* song, Dawson hesitates. "Oh my gosh, that's really difficult," she admits. "It's often about the time and the place. But you'd have to try quite hard to find a song that's a better bop than Gina G's "Ooh Aah... Just a Little Bit". That was 1996, which was the best year for pop music ever, because it was the year of the Spice Girls!"

Kadiff Kirwan and Charlie Condou as Mike and Gary.

PICTURES: LARA CORNELL, DAN FEARON, JAMES PARDON/BBC STUDIOS. STOCK IMAGES: SUMROENG/GETTY

Clark, Dawson and director Ben Williams (right).

Belinda and the Doctor are big *Interstellar Contest* fans.

Kid (Freddie Fox): not a very nice man.

Speaking of music, no song contest would be complete without some tunes, and this one features four. "Three of them are part of the contest and quite standard *Eurovision*, but one of them is... something else," she teases.

One track, she reveals, came directly from the mind of composer Murray Gold and wasn't even in the script. "When Russell asked Murray to go away and think of some *Eurovision*-style songs, he presented a song called 'Dugadoo' from an act called Dugadoo. It's a nod to the insanity of *Eurovision*. Keep an eye out for Dugadoo."

EXTRA TERRESTRIALS

"The Interstellar Song Contest" was filmed entirely at Cardiff's Wolf Studios, with the auditorium's design "somewhat inspired by Coruscant", the bustling planet-wide city from the *Star Wars* universe. "It just looks really futuristic," Dawson notes.

In true *Star Wars* fashion, the auditorium is populated by both humanoids – including up to 250 supporting artists, many of them Cardiff University students – and a wide variety of elaborately made-up aliens. Dawson's favourite, Marvin, sports a large green head.

"A huge shout out to the performers, who were in at the crack of dawn," she says. "And many of them were in heels, which was cruel and unusual on the part of the costume department – but I never heard anybody complain. Those first five days of shooting were long, but it was such a good vibe. Weirdly, it felt like being in the 'clurb', and as the internet says, 'in da clurb, we all fam.' It really did feel like that."

Unfortunately, Dawson didn't get to meet Anita Dobson, who makes a return as the enigmatic Mrs Flood. "I wasn't on set that day – she was only there for one day," Dawson says, clearly disappointed. Still, she's thrilled that the actress appears in her episode. "Of course, she's iconic," she enthuses.

Dawson was on set for much of the shoot. "Was I needed? Absolutely not. Did I eat a lot of bacon sandwiches? Yes, I did," she laughs. One of her standout memories is "watching a very, very jetlagged Ncuti Gatwa dangle from the ceiling by a harness like an absolute trooper. God love him.

"He's an extraordinary talent," she continues. "When they say 'Action', he's electric. And I told him, he must have muscles in his face that regular humans don't have – he can say so much with just a twitch of an eyebrow, a nostril, or the corner of his mouth."

Dawson also found that any day Rylan was on set was a hoot. "He's just such great company. And actually, I've been friends with Charlie Condou for a really, really long time, so the days with Gary and Mike [Kadiff Kirwan] were just lovely."

She explains that these two characters – a gay couple who attend the contest every year – are inspired by herself and some of her queer, *Eurovision*-loving friends. "They were part of my very first pitch, and there were times when I think people questioned, 'Do we need these characters?' But I'm so, so glad they stayed. They find themselves drawn into an extraordinary adventure with the Doctor. It's about human stories in time and space – that's what *Doctor Who* has always been about."

Dawson, who created bestselling fantasy series *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*, has long aspired to lead her own television show. She calls her time on *Doctor Who* the best work experience of her life.

"I didn't just see it as writing an episode of *Doctor Who*; I saw it as going to Showrunner School," she explains. "Russell has been incredibly generous with his mentorship. He allowed me into rooms I didn't need to be in. It was fascinating to watch how the whole process worked, from that email in bed to standing on set, watching [director] Ben Williams work. It has been such a learning process."

Asked what a Juno Dawson-led *Doctor Who* series might look like, she answers with one word: "Gothic". "Some of my favourite *Doctor Who* is when it has used gothic tradition, whether it's 'The Ark In Space', 'The Brain Of Morbius' or 'The Curse Of Peladon'. Or even 'The Haunting Of Villa Diodati' from the Chibnall era. I love when *Doctor Who* blends the modern and science fiction with the gothic tradition."

> **"Was I needed on set? Absolutely not. Did I eat a lot of bacon sandwiches? Yes, I did"**

In the meantime, as Dawson considers adapting "The Interstellar Song Contest" into a Target novelisation ("If I had the time, I'd certainly try my best because I love those Target books – they're gorgeous"), she's bracing herself for the episode to be analysed and discussed for decades to come.

"It's like 'The Five Doctors', isn't it," she muses, referring to *Doctor Who*'s twentieth anniversary special. "Immortality. I'm now one of those little heads on Rassilon's grave. You know, even having seen it no less than 70,000 times – because you have to watch it every time they do a new pass on the visual effects – I still find it exhilarating and enjoyable. I've heard people like it, but I'm staying well away. I don't have Twitter. I believe in the work we've done, and I hope viewers enjoy it."

Doctor Who is on BBC One and BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ globally.

This really wouldn't look out of place at *Eurovision*.

DESIGNING DOCTOR WHO

Production designer Phil Sims discusses the challenges involved in realising "The Interstellar Song Contest"'s Harmony Arena

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

THE FUN PART OF ANY design process – but on this show more than anything – is that you've got to unpack it all. You've got to read the script, then unpack it all and put it on the desk in front of you and go, "Right, how do we put that back together again so that as an audience you can see it on the screen?"

We had a lot of conversations about scale: we'd talk about how big Wembley is, how big the O2 is, how many people sit in there, how far away are they from the performance, and how you create the spectacle for such a huge amount of people that are effectively pin pricks in the distance. We landed on an auditorium that could take a couple of hundred thousand people.

The understanding of that helped us in the process of breaking down production: how to design it, how to shoot it, which elements we needed to build physically, where we'd use greenscreen, where we'd use an LED screen. There's a tiny amount of Volume [large LED wall] work in there too, which worked for us twofold. The stage where you see Rylan presenting has a set design behind it which is all through LED screens, and that's consistent with lots of live entertainment shows you see on TV now.

But it also meant that we could, if we wanted, project some of the Arena into it, or some of the VIP pods into it. So we could film them in-camera, even if they were just for reference to be replaced in post later.

The pivot that we kept revolving around is the gallery [the control room for the broadcast]. If you imagine you're in a broadcast room of a massive show like that, at some point you're going to have to communicate the Arena and the show, just as background, within a space like that; you've got lots of people at desks viewing the different feeds and the different cameras being used to broadcast the show. So you go, "Okay, well, we'll do that greenscreen, right?" Then you look at how many pages in an episode there might be, and go, "Hmm, that's gonna be quite expensive, and that stuff's got to be generated – we've got to shoot all those elements." So that became our design conundrum.

The Arena is huge, but we realised we could build a stage, and populate it, and have people around it for the intimate moments around the presenters of the show. The trickiness is in the representation of the broader show in a broadcast gallery.

Dan May from [design studio] Painting Practice helped me in visualising the whole of the Arena. Any performances and any big Arena moments we modelled and rendered, and had an Unreal [game engine] model at one point. And Ben [A Williams], the director, was amazing: he literally directed the whole intergalactic show from a point of view, then

The pods are where the posh (rich) beings sit.

PICTURES: BBC STUDIOS

The Harmony Arena. Sponsored by poppy gloss, apparently.

had to zoom out into our story to understand how you had this huge background, but really it was about the characters. Without having that micro/macro process of going out to the Arena and then back down to the characters, we wouldn't have been able to create the epic scale and background to the story. So it was really important.

Dan May and his team did an amazing job of taking our pod designs that we see extensively around the Arena – like the pod that the Doctor lands in – and incorporating them into the Arena. Then we created an Arena to encompass that and be in sympathy with it, and then a light show. We listened to the songs and had conversations about how various planets would be represented in the "nul points" version of *Eurovision*. If the intergalactic equipment of Finland were going to do this performance, what would they wear? What would they look like? What would they sing about? How would they sing it? What would their vibe be? What's the Icelandic option? What's the German option? There's some brilliant interpretations, and that was so much fun in its own right.

Visually, it's probably as big an episode as we've ever tried to do. All of us would sit and read the script and go, "How on Earth? It's enormous! How are we going to do this?" But once you get into it there's so much fun to be had. Some of it just becomes a small detail in the background, but a huge amount of effort went into it to make it feel honest and true to an intergalactic *Eurovision*.

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

HE'S BACK – AND HE'S READY TO CONQUER THE WORLD AGAIN. DIRECTOR DEAN FLEISCHER CAMP TELLS *SFX* WHAT IT TAKES TO BRING AN INTERGALACTIC MENACE TO LIVE ACTION IN LILO & STITCH

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**

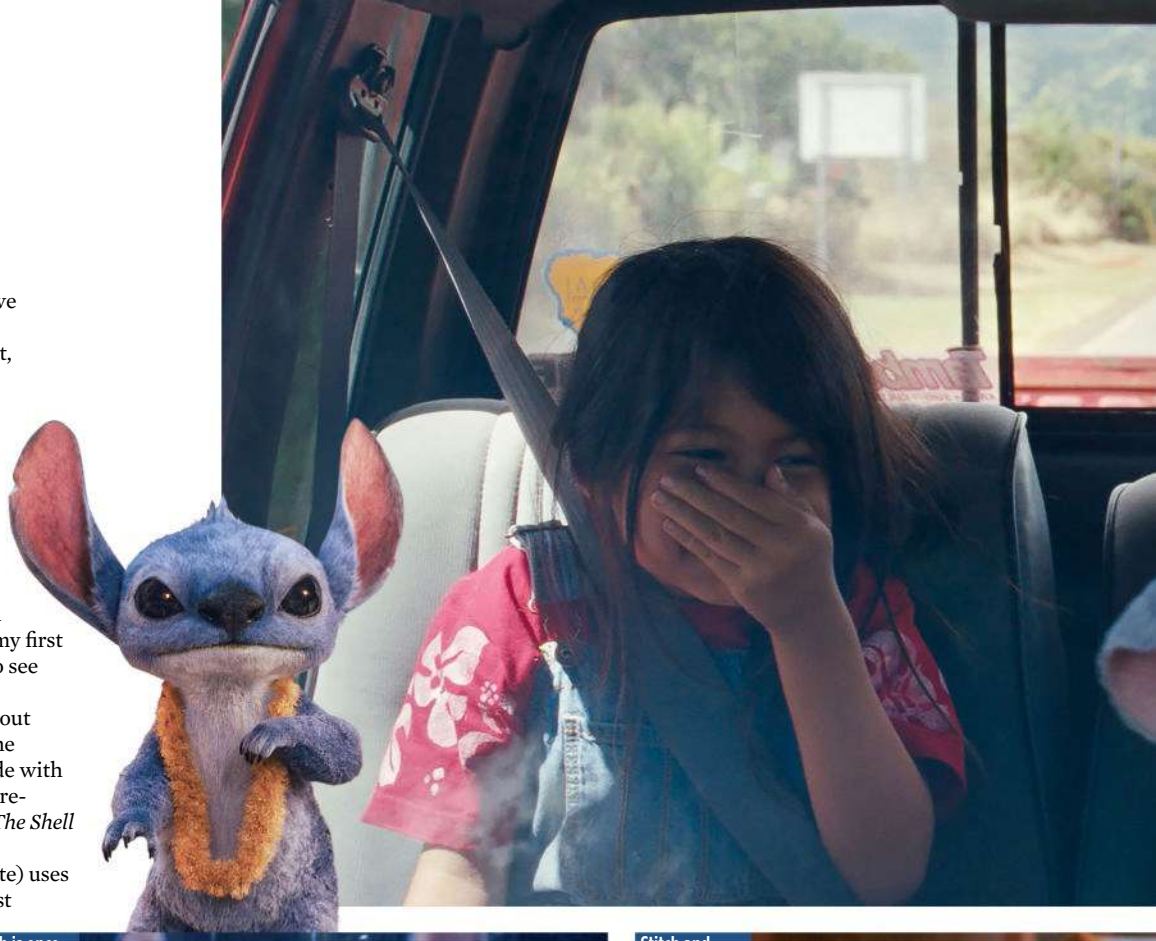
NEVER UNDERESTIMATE EXPERIMENT 626 – that squat, big-eared, sharp-toothed, extraterrestrial terror better known as Stitch. When the first trailer for Disney's live-action/CG-hybrid remake of 2002's *Lilo & Stitch* dropped online, it amassed a gargantuan 158 million views within 24 hours, the second-most for any Disney live-action film, behind 2019's *The Lion King*.

"Honestly, I felt a little bit like, 'Told you so!'" jokes its director, Dean Fleischer Camp. "I don't know why, but it always felt like an underdog thing to convince people that audiences really cared about Stitch."

He may not have a drop of royal lineage in his blood, but for the past two decades Stitch has quietly conquered Disney's fairy tale kingdom, starring in a string of sequels and globe-spanning TV spin-offs, while turning up on every piece of merchandise imaginable. If you're not yet convinced, just walk into your nearest Primark. If Disney's so-called "Renaissance Era" of the '90s was built on fresh interpretations of classic tales, from *Beauty And The Beast* to *Hercules*, then its next decade of animated films dared to shred the formula entirely.

It was a new millennium, and with competition looming from the likes of DreamWorks and Blue Sky Studios, then-Disney CEO Michael Eisner looked to try the company's hand at a smaller, more intimate film. Chris Sanders, head storyboard artist for Disney Feature Animation, offered up the odd, lonesome little creature he'd dreamed up shortly after college, a failed pitch for a children's book. It was a perfect match.

Lilo & Stitch may not have boasted battles in snow-capped mountain passes or the criss-crossed thoroughfares of Medieval Paris. But its story of an escapee alien experiment crash-landing in Hawaii, only to find an unlikely ally in Lilo Pelekai, a troubled girl living under the care of her sister Nani, held audiences fast in the loving →



embrace of ‘ohana – family, wherever we may find it.

The film looked back to Disney’s past, reviving the watercolour-painted backgrounds used in early features *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio* and *Dumbo*, while breaking away from its in-house style to employ Sanders’s own work as a basis for its character design. That innovation arrived at a pivotal point in Fleischer Camp’s own burgeoning love affair with animation. “I saw it twice in theatres,” he tells *SFX*. “I think one of my first dates in high school might have been to see *Lilo & Stitch*.”

The director has since built a career out of making the small feel epic. In 2021, he expanded a series of short films he made with then-partner Jenny Slate into the feature-length stop-motion animation *Marcel The Shell With Shoes On*, in which a minuscule, anthropomorphic conch (voiced by Slate) uses the internet to reunite with his long-lost family. Stitch would likely gobble Marcel up whole if they ever crossed paths, but as Fleischer Camp points out, the two share a surprising amount in common.

Stitch is once again voiced by Chris Sanders.

Stitch and Lilo (Maia Kealoha). Awww.

FAMILY AFFAIR

“Mostly people are like, ‘Oh, they’re such different characters’,” he says. “I think they’re actually very similar. They’re both these unique, unlikely heroes making their way in a world that wasn’t really made for them.

“And I think because of that – while they’re charming and funny and Stitch is obviously pretty crazy – they also have this bed of unspoken melancholy that I think is really important. It’s my favourite kind of story. The audience is going to find themselves falling into a trapdoor of emotion at some point.”

Fleischer Camp is aided in that particular department by screenwriter Chris Kekaniokalani Bright, who’d previously worked on Disney’s *Moana*, and who was able to bring his own experiences of growing up in Hawaii to the table. “I think you are doing yourself and the audience a big disservice if you don’t actually ground it in the real place,” the director adds.

Meanwhile, the cast is stacked with faces (and voices) both familiar and unfamiliar: Maia Kealoha as Lilo, Sydney Agudong as Nani, Kaipo Dudoit as Nani’s love interest David, Courtney B Vance as social worker Cobra Bubbles, and Hannah Waddingham as the Grand Councilwoman of the United Galactic Federation. *Lilo & Stitch* also, crucially, reunites several of the animated film’s original voice cast: Tia Carrere, the voice of Nani, as a new social worker character named Mrs Kekoa; Amy Hill, the voice of Mrs Hasagawa, as another new addition, David’s grandmother Tūtū; and Jason Scott Lee, the voice of David, as the lū‘au manager who employs Nani. “It was really heartwarming to watch them see each other for the first time in a long time and swap stories,” says the director.

Hill and Carrere’s new characters are part of several key changes made to the existing story. Fleischer Camp explains that, as hinted in the trailer, “We’re doing something a little different with Jumba and Pleakley”, the hapless but loveable intergalactic duo who will here don human disguises that bear a remarkable similarity to actors Zach Galifianakis and Billy Magnussen. They also voice the characters in their natural, alien forms.

There was more, too, that the director felt he could do with the sibling relationship at the film’s centre. “There was a real opportunity to ground them in a lived reality in a way that you can do in animated films, but I don’t think you can do in that animated film in quite as much detail and real texture as we were able to,” the director explains. “My mom was a social worker so I saw a lot of these stories play out, all too often, and they don’t always have happy endings. I felt really excited about giving the Pelekai sisters a happy ending.”

Of course, any new *Lilo & Stitch* lives or dies on the basis of one factor: cuteness. Experiment 626 must be feral but sweet, wearing a grin like an undone zipper, and with big, black, pupil-less eyes as round as buttons.

Fleischer Camp spent roughly eight months with a team of artists on perfecting a sketched and painted version of Stitch before a single 3D model was created, to create a kind of “tuning fork” that they could always go back to and reference. “We found ourselves doing that a lot,” the director says. “You don’t realise how much you can cheat in an animated film – that’s part of what makes animation wonderful. But in 3D you have to fill in a lot of blanks.”

For reference, they pulled pieces from the Disney archives, and looped in members of the

ALL PICTURES © DISNEY; STOCK IMAGES: ALI KARAKOC/GETTY

Lilo, Stitch and Nani go for a "relaxing" drive.

Sydney Agudong plays the new Nani (left).

original animation team, including lead animator on *Stitch*, Alex Kupershmidt. "He would do drawovers," Fleischer Camp explains. "We would send him our test footage and he would say, 'Okay, actually his butt slopes this way and his gait works more like this.'"

Sanders himself, who co-directed the 2002 film and has voiced nearly every iteration of Stitch, was busy at work on his own *The Wild Robot*, released last year. Yet he offered his support where he could, and eagerly jumped back into the vocal booth.

"His energy when he's doing Stitch's voice is unbelievable," Fleischer Camp says. "I would ask him to do a take and he would just go on for 15 minutes at, like, an 11, at the highest energy level. I don't know how this man doesn't just pass out at 4.30pm every night."

On set, Stitch would be portrayed by an actor in a grey skintight suit for more emotional scenes with human co-stars, while his path of destruction would be carved out using cleverly hidden crew members, crouched behind doors

> **"The audience is going to find themselves falling into a trapdoor of emotion at some point"**

or out of frame and pulling at strings, "so that things get knocked over and it matches exactly the speed that Stitch goes at. It was very hard. We tried as much as possible to do that practically. Sometimes we nailed it, sometimes we'd have to scrap that idea and have some CG intervention."

At other times, a physical Stitch could be rolled onto set. A "Stitch stuffie", as it was referred to by the crew, it was actually an operatable puppet made to resemble the character's look in the finished film.

"I was pretty passionate that Maia would need something to act opposite," Fleischer Camp says. "Obviously, when you're spending money on a movie everyone goes, 'Oh, could she just act with a tennis ball if we're going to be replacing Stitch entirely?' It just felt like this was the heart of the movie and she needed to have a proper scene partner."

Kealoha, in fact, became so attached to the "Stitch stuffie" that, "even when they weren't shooting scenes with the two of them that day, Maia would insist on, before she went home, giving him a kiss goodnight.

"So we were, like, 'Get him out of the truck and get him on the rig', and she'd give him a kiss goodnight. It was very sweet."

Considering the first trailer's record-breaking performance, it seems like audiences feel exactly the same way.

Lilo & Stitch is in cinemas from 23 May.

STARBOY

Stitch's CV is longer than you think. Here's what he's been up to since the original film

STITCH! THE MOVIE (2003)
A feature-length backdoor pilot for a TV series, it introduces us to the previous 625 of Dr Jumba Jookiba's experiments.

LILO & STITCH: THE SERIES (2003)
Continuing on from *Stitch! The Movie*, it sees Lilo and Stitch on a mission to recapture the missing experiments, show them they can be good, and welcome them to their 'ohana.

LILO & STITCH 2: STITCH HAS A GLITCH (2005)
A direct-to-video sequel set before the events of *Stitch! The Movie*, it sees our blue hero start to revert to his old, destructive ways, threatening to drive a wedge between him and Lilo.

LEROY & STITCH (2006)
The feature-length finale to *Lilo & Stitch: The Series*, it centres on Experiment 629, otherwise known as Leroy – a near-clone of Stitch, only a little less fluffy and a lot more maniacal.

STITCH! (2008)
With Lilo headed off to college, Stitch makes the jump from Hawaii to the fictional island of Izayoi, off the coast of Okinawa, for this Japanese anime series. There, he befriends a girl named Yuna Kamihara and gets up to plenty more hijinks.

STITCH & AI (2017)
Stitch's most recent escapade is this English-language donghua, or Chinese animation, set in the Huangshan mountains and featuring a girl named Wang Ai Ling as his new human companion.

SHEER

SWIG THAT MAGIC POTION AND STEP INTO THE RING FOR

ASTERIX & OBELIX: THE BIG FIGHT

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD

GAUL

Caesar's doing it all for mother's approval.

Two Gauls walk into a fish bar.

FOR ALAIN CHABAT, history is repeating. Not the kind of history that could ever be unearthed by archaeologists, but the one recorded by the combined genius of René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. A colourful, knockabout past, bursting with killer puns and sorcerous potions, plucky Gauls and hapless Romans. A past forever fixed at 50 BC.

"I love this universe," Chabat tells *SFX*. "I could do this as a job, just doing *Asterix*, all my life. I love the characters. They're funny and they're charming. They have a lot of heart."

In 2002, Chabat wrote and directed *Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*, a live-action take on the scrappy Gaul warriors. Now he's one of the key creative forces behind *Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight*, a TV mini-series that brings the world of Goscinny and Uderzo to vivid life through 3D CG animation.

"It was a great way to get back to this world while being very different," says Chabat, who again serves as writer and director. "It's animation. It's not a movie; it's a series. So there was plenty of new territory to discover."

"It gives you more freedom," says fellow director Fabrice Joubert of the move to computer animation. "You have a budget, but you can create whatever you want visually, especially with this one, where we had to create the whole set for the fight."

"The Big Fight is supposed to be like the ancient version of a big Las Vegas match," says Chabat.

Joubert nods. "There was something about giving it scope that we were able to do in CGI, definitely."

MOMMIE DEAREST

The five-part Netflix show takes its cue from *Asterix And The Big Fight – Le Combat Des Chefs* in the original French – the seventh book in the *Asterix* series. Originally serialised in *Pilote* magazine from 1964 before being collected as a comic album two years later, it finds the indomitable Gauls still holding the line against Caesar and his legions. But as the Romans plot to defeat this last pocket of resistance by cunning use of the ancient Gaulish custom of the Big Fight – a trial of combat between tribal chiefs – a wayward menhir clonks Getafix, the village druid, master of the secret formula that gives the villagers their superhuman might.

"Getafix is crazy and has no clue how to make more magic potion, so the Gauls are in huge danger," says Chabat. "It's always difficult to find a story when these Gauls are invincible. You want them to be weak at one point, so it's a good danger for our heroes.

"It's basically faithful to the original story, even if we take a few liberties. It was really cool to go deep into these characters, emotionally and comedy-wise. We add some characters. Julius Caesar has his mother with him now. It was all about, 'How come this Caesar is so obsessed with conquering the world?' We came up with the idea that it's really to impress his mother, because she's always thinking it's never enough. That was his motivation to conquer the world – his mother!"

Another new character is Metadata, continuing the proud *Asterix* tradition of punning names. "Caesar never gets her name right," smiles Chabat. "Sometimes he calls her Wikipedia. She's a Roman, but she's passionate about Gaul culture, and she's the one who finds the idea of the Big Fight to beat the Gauls."

"We have some secondary characters that are very strong," adds Joubert. "Like Bibus, who's like a marketing guy. He's great. He's just for one sequence but he steals the show, almost."

Does *Asterix* embody a specifically French sense of humour? Chabat isn't so sure.

"It's weird, because Goscinny, the writer, he's the son of Jewish immigrants, grew up in Argentina, went to New York and worked with Harvey Kurtzman and *Mad* and then came back to France. So it's this mix of many influences and cultures. American culture, Anglo-Saxon culture. I don't know if it's French, but it's this mix of many influences, plus his amazing talent."

As Chabat shares with *SFX*, the series takes direct inspiration from the equally characterful art style of Uderzo. "We always came back to

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Watch your head near those heavy menhirs.

This is a *Star Wars* inspired Roman Empire.

the original material and tried to capture the energy of the Uderzo style. It's so powerful. It was a big challenge to do this in a modern way but still remain faithful. It was an interesting balance to keep, all along the process."

"Uderzo's style at the time was already very dynamic and very animated," says Joubert. "You can feel in the way he was drawing the characters – they were very animated. He wanted to do animation."

"Goscinny also wanted to be kind of the French Walt Disney at the time," notes Chabat. "He had this dream."

For Aurélien Predal, the show's production designer, Uderzo's art was both a touchstone and a stepping-off point. "For the characters, we followed the comic book. We had a bit more freedom in the backgrounds. A lot of the sets, in the comic book you only see them on one page, or in one image. With some of those environments, we had a lot of freedom to develop them ourselves.

"For example, we have a big funfair in episode four. We see only a few stands in the comic book, but a lot of action sequences are taking place in this environment, so we had to develop a lot of attractions. They had so many good ideas in the script. The place where the fight takes place – in the comic book it's just like a ring in the middle of a field. And in the script they were describing a massive arena with corridors inside and pyrotechnic effects. It gave us the freedom to explore."

EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

For all its fantastical trimmings, this is still ancient history. "The most important thing was not to cross the line in terms of the believability of the era," says Predal, whose credits include *Inside Out 2* and *Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*. "It's not science fiction, so it needs to be doable. We need to explain it with the technology of that time.

"The set has to feel in line with the characters. All of Uderzo's backgrounds are very detailed and realistic, and you can fully immerse yourself in them. He contrasts them with the characters, who have very simple shapes. It was about finding the balance in CG to recreate that feeling.

"With the humour side, you have to caricature," Predal continues. "You have to find the perspective to caricature the set. For instance, all the Roman elements are very pushed in terms of scale, so Caesar's palace is almost a kilometre long. We push the massive aspect of it. On my first call with Alain, he told me of his love of *Star Wars*. He wanted to show the Roman Empire like the Empire in *Star Wars*. So we push the totalitarian architecture, all the repetition. Then everything to do with the Gauls is very artisanal, with irregular shapes. We try to find the contrast of the different environments.

"We tried to get close to the [dynamic] aspect of the comic book, specifically in some action sequences, where we put speed lines or we use colour cards to forget the background and just have solid colour behind the characters. So we push the dynamism in specific sequences."

The series is made by award-winning animation studio TAT Productions, based in Toulouse, France. "It has its own pipeline," Predal tells *SFX*. "Because we wanted to push a feature quality of the image with a series budget and constraint, it was very important to use the best of the talent at the studio. So we used that classic CG pipeline.

"We couldn't do a full, painterly *Spider-Verse* look, so we decided to go with something quite tactile – almost like stop-motion – and because of that, all of the materials became very important. You feel the materials. Everything is made of wood, bricks, stone. We didn't want to use photo-textures, so it's a graphical interpretation of every texture."

Chabat has a connection to *Asterix* beyond his writing and directing credits on *The Big Fight*. In the French version of the series he also voices the heroic Gaul, after previously playing Shrek in the French dub of the DreamWorks franchise. Just how do you find a voice that matches a character everyone already hears in their heads?

"I don't know," shrugs Chabat. "It's the same for me. I have the French voice of Roger Carel, who was the mythical voice of Asterix at the time, and then Christian Clavier, who was Asterix in my *Mission Cleopatra*. So to find a voice where it was, 'Yes, Asterix is speaking like this in my head...' Hopefully it will work with the audience. It was not easy."

The *Asterix* tales describe a small but fearless band of people standing up against an oppressor making an incursion into their land. Is there a resonance there for the world we live in today?

> **"He wanted to show the Roman Empire like the Empire in Star Wars"**

"Always," says Chabat. "It was the same at the time – the little against the huge. Unfortunately, there's a resonance. The purpose of the show is to make people laugh and have a good time, but yes, there's a history that repeats, over and over. Rome wants to have the world exactly as they are – their gods, their culture. And the Gauls, it's a little village. They want to keep their identity. But I don't see the Gauls as nationalists, more as funny characters. They are dirty, loud, they have no discipline!"

"They want to enjoy life," agrees Joubert. "They want to eat, they want to drink, they want to make noise. They're terrible!"

So just why does the world of *Asterix* endure? Why are we still returning to 50 BC?

"I'm always asking this question too," admits Chabat. "How come these characters are still there and are still relevant and interesting?"

"Maybe it's their rebellious spirit," offers Joubert. "They really stick with their ideals, and that's something that people can relate to. And they are very appealing characters."

Chabat smiles. "And they are not perfect at all. They're far from perfect. It's pretty comforting!"

Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight is on Netflix from 30 April.

EMMA NEWMAN

Ahoy there! The British writer talks pirates, genre and optimism

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Spirit Photographic

SOMETIMES, IT'S EASY JUST TO SAY YES. Such a moment occurred for Emma Newman when publishers Solaris came to her with an idea. Would she like to write a novel set in the world of Alexandre Dumas of *The Count Of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* fame, but with added vampires and werewolves? "I was like, 'How could I not be interested in that?'" Newman says.

So it was she began to write *The Vengeance*. Though other authors will also get to play in what's being promoted as the Vampires Of Dumas sandbox, Newman says she was given "complete freedom" to do what she wanted. She chose to write a coming-of-age quest story about a girl, Morgane, who grows up having rip-roaring adventures as the daughter of a pirate captain, but finds, in a moment of tragedy, that her lineage is not as she's been told.

Because there are lots of "moving parts" in the wider project, it took a while for the book to get a publication date. It was actually written as far back as late 2020 and 2021, when Newman had for a long time been at work on her Planetfall sequence – hard SF books dealing with "heavy" ideas such as "the impact of neoliberal, late-stage capitalist policies in the near future".

So it was, Newman says, a relief to switch focus, if a little discombobulating. "I was thinking, 'Am I doing something really stupid here? Is this how I should be spending my time?'" she remembers. "And that sounds utterly ridiculous because that implies that I have some kind of moral obligation always to be writing serious things. As soon as I clocked that, I thought, 'Oh, give over, get over yourself and just have some fun!'"

PROCESSING TIME

This, she duly did, with certain caveats. "You can take the girl out of the dystopian near-future of science fiction, but you can't take the dystopian out of the girl," she says. "In this book, there is still an exploration of generational trauma and commentary on the class system and the fundamental injustice that's baked into society. I'm still going to talk about those things, even if there are swords and werewolves and huge fights in 17th century warehouses. You know, that's the way I roll." At which point Newman bursts out laughing.

Which is not to say it was all plain sailing. The book was, after all, written during the pandemic. While Newman doesn't want to go into too many details, this was a difficult time in her personal life. "I kind of spent 2022 rebuilding myself from the ground up," she says.

Digging into this further, when she talks of her Planetfall books, there's a sense that writing them wasn't just about dealing with big political ideas, but at times about matters closer to home, too. *Before Mars* (2018), she says, was a novel that was "directly processing" the "experience of postnatal depression".

Whatever experiences went into them, these are books far removed from those that initially made Newman's name: the Split Worlds sequence, set in a kind of urban fantasy Regency England. Moving into SF looked like a handbrake turn, and yet that's not how Newman sees things. She wasn't especially aware of urban fantasy before she wrote the first volume in the sequence, 2013's *Between Two Thorns*. "It wasn't a genre I'd really read, which is probably why it's quite a weird series because, in my mind, it spans several genres," she says.

BIODATA

From **Penzance, Cornwall**

Greatest Hits
Newman has written two series: the urban fantasy sequence Split Worlds and the Planetfall SF books. She's also written a pair of gaslamp fantasy novellas set in 1850s England, part of an Industrial Magic series. Newman is a podcaster and audiobook narrator too.

Random Fact
Newman has spent a lot of time playing vampires in LARPs. Conceptually, she finds them hard to separate from the "parasitic landed gentry".

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

In contrast, when she moved into SF, "It felt spiritually like I was coming home." Besides, she adds, "Genre comes after character and story." And while Newman's currently at work on a sequel to *The Vengeance*, she plans to return to SF. In her mind, the Planetfall sequence isn't yet complete. Then there are the different kinds of stories and scenarios she wants to explore in her work.

A few years back, Newman says, she was worried about where events seemed to be taking us – towards a dystopian future, essentially – and "wanted to grab people and shake them". Today, following "having a kind of existential crisis in terms of my creative work", she sees things a little differently. "It's so easy to see a bad future from where we are now," she says, "I feel like it takes a far greater effort for me to try and extrapolate a positive future from where we are now. So to me, that signals that this is where the work needs to be done."

It comes as no surprise to discover that she hugely admires Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry For The Future* ("One of the most incredible pieces of work I've read in decades"), which grapples with how we might get to a better world. She recently wrote an opinion piece for *The Guardian* about the potential role of SF writers in helping policymakers to visualise the future, a theme also addressed in her podcast for Friends Of The Earth, *Imagining Tomorrow*.

Not, to return to an earlier point, that Newman sees any need for all her work to be so serious. "I'm a huge fan of escapism," she says. "It's served me well in my life!"

The Vengeance – the first book in the Vampires Of Dumas series – is published by Solaris on 6 May.

> “It takes a far greater effort for me to extrapolate a positive future from where we are now”

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WORDS: **LUKE SMITH**

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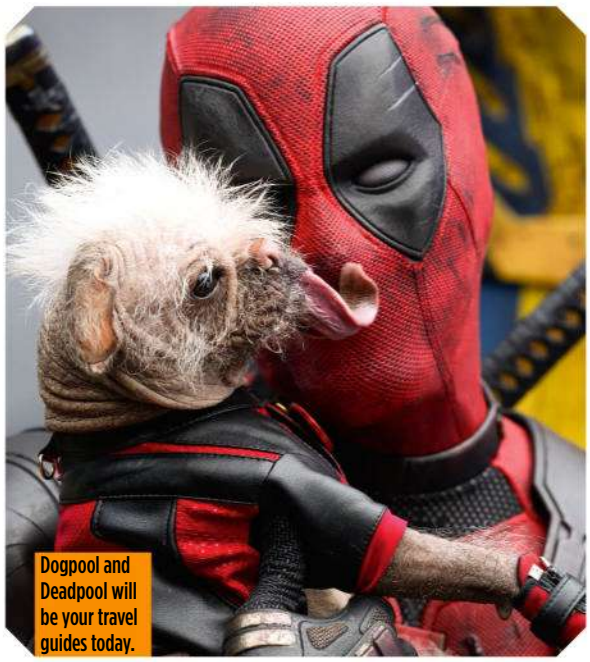

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MAY 2025

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edited by Ian Berriman

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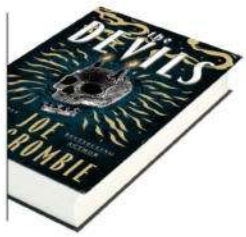

86 THE DEVILS

→ A street urchin learns she's a royal heir in Joe Abercrombie's latest. But will she live to take the throne?

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SINNERS

Blood brothers

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 138 minutes

Director **Ryan Coogler**

Cast **Michael B Jordan, Hailee Steinfeld, Jack O'Connell, Delroy Lindo, Wunmi Mosaku**

The dream team of director Ryan Coogler and star Michael B Jordan have already gone on a wild journey, from gut-punch indie *Fruitvale Station* to stirring sports drama *Creed* to superheroes-with-substance blockbuster *Black Panther*. And yet *Sinners*, a vampire movie set in the Jim Crow-era American South of 1932, still feels like a jack-knife left turn.

For at least half of its hefty running time, Coogler plays it straight, tracking twin brothers Smoke and Stack (both played by Jordan) from being gangsters in Capone's Chicago to setting up a juke joint in their dirt-poor home town of Clarksdale, Mississippi. We watch, over a single sun-scorched day, as they purchase and convert a mill, secure food and booze, and find themselves a blues band led by Delta Slim (Delroy Lindo) and their younger cousin, Preacher Boy Sam (Miles Caton).

Then the sun sets and the partying begins, only for *Sinners* to veer into siege movie territory when an ever-growing band of vampires led by the dangerously charismatic Remick (Jack O'Connell) descend on the new juke joint like it's one big, throbbing jugular.

"Oh my god, is he putting the milk in the tea first?!"

If that all sounds rather *From Dusk Till Dawn*, well it is. But then it also isn't, with Coogler carefully introducing the rest of his ensemble cast (Hailee Steinfeld, Wunmi Mosaku, Omar Benson Miller, Li Jun Li) and playing it more like a John Sayles drama than an exploitation jamboree. Such is the restraint, viewers will most likely think they're watching a prestige drama built for awards contention, though the supernatural elements are seeded and the twist has been spoiled by the marketing, à la last year's "surprise" vampire flick, *Abigail*.

What really sets *Sinners* apart, though, is the way it uses genre to examine themes of freedom, fellowship, family, ancestry and evil, with the backdrop of cotton-picking, grinding poverty and the Ku Klux Klan making the vampire posse seem... well, the lesser of two evils. "Together forever," says Remick, and watching the camaraderie of the creatures of the night as they perform an Irish jig in the darkness beyond the lit-up juke joint offers a tempting prospect.

> **"Uses genre to examine themes of freedom, family and evil"**

Genre fans, meanwhile, will delight in the suggestion that Sam's outrageous musical talent is anything but God-given (Coogler was inspired by '30s blues musician Robert Johnson, rumoured to have sold his soul to the Devil in return for success). Also pleasing is the fact that there's nothing polite or prettified about *Sinners*' final-act shift into outright horror movie territory. Coogler's impressive film instead conjures up a series of indelible images as it embraces tropes – garlic, stakes, skin sizzling in sunlight – and hoses gore, with Ludwig Göransson's previously low-key score cranking into a full-on '70s rock opera, blood pumping in its veins. **Jamie Graham**

Sinners is the second R-rated horror movie (after *Nope*) to be shot with IMAX cameras. Christopher Nolan gave advice.

THE UGLY STEPSISTER

★★★★☆

RELEASED 25 APRIL

18 | 105 minutes

Director **Emilie Blichfeldt**

Cast **Lea Myren, Thea Sofie Loch Næss, Ane Dahl Torp, Isac Calmroth**

Norwegian director Emilie Blichfeldt's debut reimagines Cinderella through a blackly comic body-horror lens. While the film makes salient points about how brutalising your body to conform to beauty standards has been going on since time immemorial, its wonderfully grisly moments appear too infrequently for it to become a true genre classic.

Lea Myren delivers as Elvira, the maligned stepsister driven to painful lengths in her pursuit of a prince. Blichfeldt draws on beauty rituals that were sadly around long before anaesthesia was, and shows the world transforming to become kinder towards Elvira as she conforms.

The aesthetic is delicious, juxtaposing the pastel opulence of high society with the horrors of Elvira's beauty procedures and her family home filled with corpses, crafting the feeling of a cursed picture book. Thea Sofie Loch Næss is chilling as adored Cinderella figure Agnes, who sneers at Elvira's ambition for a happily-ever-after.

While the feminist talking points hit, Blichfeldt seems hesitant to fully embrace the genre's potential, and the empowering conclusion feels out of step with the savagery that preceded it. A more unrelenting descent into the horrors of womanhood might have made *The Ugly Stepsister* the true belle of the horror cinema ball. **Leila Latif**

SNOW WHITE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 109 minutes

Director **Marc Webb**

Cast **Rachel Zegler, Gal Gadot, Andrew Burnap, Jeremy Swift**

This Disney live-action remake arrives choking on a poison apple filled with political and ableist controversies. Reimagined from the 1937 original, it's been yelled at, re-edited, re-assessed and rejected, with leadsRachel Zegler and Gal Gadot on opposite sides of a literal war.

It's too late to debate whether there was wisdom in remaking a film so famously fraught with outdated attitudes to dwarfism. And as a Disney fairy tale, it's really not bad. Zegler could sing her way out of a straitjacket, her mighty vocals contrasting with her sweet performance as people's princess Snow White.

Gadot, as the evil Queen, is too similar to Angelina Jolie's Maleficent; it's a shame nobody thought to use this opportunity to make her stand out more. The prince has been replaced by a bandit named Jonathan (Andrew Burnap), who at least gets a proper back story with Snow White before he snogs her corpse.

As for the dwarfs: one is voiced by an actor with dwarfism, but that does little to offset the fact that they're CG-identical to their cartoon originals, with all the problems that entails. Still, while Disney's decision-making may be dubious, at least director Marc Webb knows how to create a pacy, charming kids' film with new songs that stand out and old ones to warm the cockles.

Meg Wilde

A MINECRAFT MOVIE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 101 minutes

Director **Jared Hess**

Cast **Jason Momoa, Jack Black, Danielle Brooks, Jennifer Coolidge**

"We're not in Idaho anymore!" ex videogame champ Garrett (Jason Momoa) quips on being transported into the psychedelic *Minecraft* universe. And there is an Ozian element to the "Overworld", a land of cubic blocks where anything can be built in seconds.

There are worse templates for director Jared Hess to follow. Garrett and his three human companions – teenager Natalie (Emma Myers), her brother Henry (Sebastian Hansen) and animal lover Dawn (Danielle Brooks) – try to find the exit without being eliminated by evil sorceress Malgosha and her rapacious pig army. Jack Black, meanwhile, gleefully stands in for the Wizard as Steve, a *Minecraft* expert with his own lava chicken shack and a penchant for bursting into song.

Black's anarchic energy proves a good fit for a film whose uneven trajectory encompasses a multitude of chaotic set-pieces involving skeletons, zombies and robots. A loopy subplot, meanwhile, sees one of the Overworld's less threatening denizens finding its way into the real world, where it's run over by Jennifer Coolidge's schoolmarm and taken out for dinner.

High art it isn't. Yet *A Minecraft Movie* does a decent job of turning a plotless pastime into a colourful, family-friendly spectacle. **Neil Smith**

DEATH OF A UNICORN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 107 minutes

Director **Alex Scharfman**

Cast **Paul Rudd, Jenna Ortega, Will Poulter, Richard E Grant**

Karma comes with hooves in this zany creature feature, a monster mash in the *Jurassic Park* vein that also doubles as a piercing satire on the callousness of the wealthy.

Like *The Menu* and *Saltburn*, its targets are the sort of venal one-percenters who, when faced with a mythical beast like the fabled unicorn, instantly contemplate the best way to exploit it. The comeuppance they get in return is the least they deserve in a fantasy that finds lots of ways for its titular equine to be murderously and malevolently horny.

The film's lone "good" characters are an estranged father and daughter (*Ant-Man*'s Paul Rudd and *Wednesday*'s Jenna Ortega) who, while driving to his boss's mountain retreat, accidentally hit a unicorn. Their decision to bring the wounded animal with them to the palatial home of ailing bigwig Odell (Richard E Grant) and his stony-hearted wife Belinda (Téa Leoni) has lethal ramifications for everyone, not least when the creature's parents come looking for it.

Alex Scharfman's feature debut boasts a side-splitting turn from Will Poulter as Odell's arrogant son Shep. As a satire, alas, it's rather tame and toothless, while its gory catalogue of skewerings and impalements ultimately becomes wearying.

Neil Smith

THE WOMAN IN THE YARD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 88 minutes

Director **Jaume Collet-Serra**

Cast **Danielle Deadwyler, Okwui Okpokwasili, Russell Hornsby, Peyton Jackson**

Before his time as an action director, Jaume Collet-Serra broke out as a horror filmmaker with the likes of *House Of Wax* and *Orphan*, so hopes were high for his return to the genre in stripped-down Blumhouse style. The result, however, is something of a misfire.

Danielle Deadwyler gives it her all as Ramona, a woman crippled by grief and hobbling on crutches following the car crash that killed her husband, yet the story is so slight as to better suit a short film.

Ramona and her kids are picking up the pieces (and unpaid bills) in their remote farmhouse when a mysterious woman shows up in their yard. Immediately, strange occurrences start and there is the feeling of death creeping back into their lives.

The titular spectre, dressed for a funeral and played with creepiness by Okwui Okpokwasili, is initially effective, switching positions when no one is looking Weeping Angel style.

But once the truth – or at least the film's take on it – is fully unveiled, the attempts to ramp up momentum just lead to some very rudimentary scare material, not to mention a lot of clichéd, obvious bad decision behaviour from the characters. And the denouement is eye-rolling in its lack of subtlety. **James White**

"Well, I still say it's postmodern, not Cubist."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- A location has a name awfully similar to San Junipero.
- There's another callback, like the words "White Bear" or a *Space Fleet* T-shirt...
- A character attaches a "Nubbin" to their temple.

- Someone recites a "commercial message".
- The episode's main protagonist kills someone.
- People watch *The Real Housewives Of Atlanta*.
- Someone mentions almond milk.

BLACK MIRROR Season Seven

Into Infinity and beyond

★★★★½

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Creator **Charlie Brooker**

Cast **Rashida Jones, Siena Kelly, Issa Rae, Peter Capaldi, Paul Giamatti, Cristin Milioti**

EPISODES 7.01-7.06 **After an** underwhelming fifth season and a sixth which – by bending the format to allow horror tales without a technological focus – somehow felt a little like it was *cheating*, the latest run of Charlie Brooker's anthology series is an unqualified return to form, combining the the show's trademark bleak twists with the return of old favourites, and also a sizeable amount of pathos.

"USS Callister: Into Infinity", a feature-length sequel to a season four favourite, is the most eye-catching entry. Quesioning whether he really left its "digital clone" heroes in a happy place, Brooker and his co-writers cleverly unpack the universe of MMO game *Infinity* further, finding smart ways to resurrect dead characters along the way.

Returning characters (from "Bandersnatch") also feature – if only briefly – in "Plaything", which renders virtual pets sinister as we learn just how far a '90s videogame journo was willing to go to protect his digital brood. Peter Capaldi puts his wraith-like intensity to good use as an older version of the character, and there are some effective bad-trip visuals. If it's textbook old-school *Black Mirror* you're after, this may be the place to start – along with "Bête Noire", a darkly humorous riff on the Mandela Effect which sees an office worker *Single White Female*-d in mind-boggling fashion by the "school freak".

> **"The latest run is an unqualified return to form"**

A loving tribute to '40s cinema told largely in black and white, "Hotel Reverie" *doesn't* revisit past glories, but – thanks to its central same-sex romance – has unmistakable echoes of season three classic "San Junipero". Here's hoping the high concept – tech which allows classic movies to be "recast" with modern actors entering the narrative – doesn't give Netflix ideas. Emma Corrin steals the show, remarkably expressive as tragic film star Dorothy Chambers.

The streamer's own financial model seems to be a target in "Common People", an affecting tale that skewers the way corporations keep tweaking their subscription packages – only in this case, with consequences that are a matter of life and death. Chris O'Dowd and Rashida Jones excel as the struggling couple gradually ground down by heartless capitalism.

But it's "Eulogy", a bittersweet tale of what-might-have-beens with all the pleasures of an investigative procedural, that's the standout, powered by a bravura performance by Paul Giamatti as a man who, after learning of the death of an old flame, must revisit a life-changing heartbreak.

It's an ingeniously mounted and moving meditation on the unreliability of memory, and the tendency to centre ourselves as the victim in any romantic disappointment. **Ian Berriman**

i When asked recently, Peter Capaldi said that his favourite *Black Mirror* episode is season two's "The Waldo Moment".

DEVIL MAY CRY Season One

This time, tears of joy

★★★★½

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Showrunner **Adi Shankar**
Cast **Johnny Yong Bosch, Scout Taylor-Compton, Hoon Lee, Kevin Conroy**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The *Devil May Cry*** games revolve around silver-haired demon hunter Dante, who wields dual pistols and a sword bigger than he is. Gravity-defying action is mixed into cutscenes just as much as the over-the-top gameplay – from surfboarding on enemies to using shotguns like nunchucks.

This Netflix anime totally gets the appeal of blending stylish choreography with silliness, and its slick production luxuriates in all of the above, building on the success of the *Castlevania* anime (whose showrunner, Adi Shankar, returns).

In between the spectacle, *Devil May Cry* leverages the medium to deftly explore the civilian lives affected by all this conflict – an angle almost completely absent from the source material. This culminates in a fantastic mid-season episode that mixes animation styles and features almost no dialogue.

Frantically paced, this initial eight-episode offering tells a complete story that opens the door for more. It's packed with intense and joyous choreography, with fantastic animation that sells the energy of every moment of explosive violence.

Set in its own continuity – no knowledge of the games is required – it sees Dante caught up in a holy war between Hell and Darkcom, a militarised US-backed group of fanatics, fending off both groups' attempts to get hold of a Macguffin for their own ends. He's joined by Lieutenant "Lady" Arkham, recast here to have a deeper connection to the ongoing conflict. While occasionally placed in more peril, Lady still kicks just as much arse.

Though wince-worthy, the blood and gore is rarely too grim, mixed as it is with vibrant colours and fist-pumping music. It's a hell of a good time that's hard to resist bingeing.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

No getting away from it; the guns were probably too big.

i The series features two posthumous vocal performances, from Kevin Conroy and Tony Todd.

THE BONDSMAN Season One

The job from Hell

★★★½☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
Showrunner **Erik Oleson**
Cast **Kevin Bacon, Beth Grant, Jennifer Nettles, Damon Herriman**

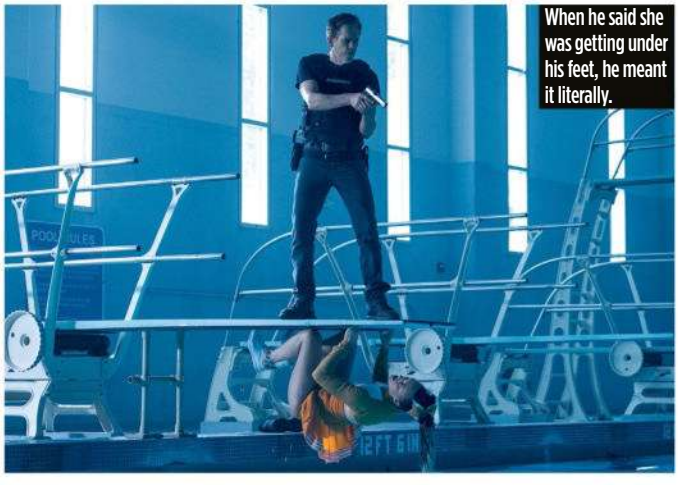
EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Four decades on** from his greatest cinematic achievement, Kevin Bacon is still doing the same old shtick. No, not bringing the transformative joy of dance to repressed societies, but facing weird, otherworldly shit in banal US small towns with a no-nonsense redneck pragmatism. But he is *so* good at it.

This time, Bacon is Hub Halloran, a shifty bondsman in rural Georgia, who dies in the very first scene while tracking down local reprobate businessman (and current boyfriend to Hub's ex) Lucky Callahan. Hub was destined for Hell (for spoilery reasons revealed later in the season), but the Devil has other plans for him. So Hub resurrects, but with a slight change to his job description – he's now a demon hunter. And for some reason, demons are very interested in Hub's scuzzy little hometown at the moment.

It sounds like the set-up for some gonzo, Grindhouse-esque crazy bloodfest like *Ash vs Evil Dead*, *Blood Drive* or *Twisted Metal*, but while there are plenty of comparable horror moments, *The Bondsman* has a very different tone: a scuzzy, hardboiled, down-to-earth stoicism, with a dry, laconic wit. Oh, and some good old country singing (though, oddly, the non-diegetic music choices veer more towards '80s and '90s alternative pop, kicking off with the perfectly chosen "Spirit In The Sky").

The messy relationships at the show's heart keep the supernatural horror grounded, and also give us Hub's gnarly old mum, who's right in the centre of the action – it's a brilliant performance from Beth Grant.

There's little you haven't seen before here, and the CG demons are a tad ropey at times, but the laidback, bluegrass atmosphere, rough-hewn characters and dry humour infuse the show with a grizzled charm. And it's great to see Kevin Bacon doing what he does best once again. **Dave Golder**



When he said she was getting under his feet, he meant it literally.

i *The Bondsman* is filmed in Grantville, Georgia, a location made famous by *The Walking Dead* episode "Clear".

THE STUDIO Season One

Once Upon A Time In Hollywood

★★★★½

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now, Wednesdays**

Creators **Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, Frida Perez, Peter Huyck, Alex Gregory**

Cast **Seth Rogen, Catherine O'Hara, Katheryn Hahn, Chase Sui Wonders**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **"You want art,** you watch TV," sniffs a self-righteous orthopaedic surgeon to Seth Rogen's Matt Remick, head of the fictional Continental Studios, in this head-swimmingly meta comedy series.

She's trying to convince him that his work isn't quite as life-or-death as he thinks, but the message falls on deaf ears. Movies are all Remick cares about – that and his own reputation. Tasked with making a Kool-Aid movie, he spends the whole 10-episode series trying to reconcile art and commercialism, embarrassing himself every step of the way. Remick isn't quite David Brent, but he's also not far off, and his increasingly desperate attempts to win the approval of Martin Scorsese, Zoë Kravitz, Sarah Polley and a whole host of other high-profile guest stars are as funny as they are pathetic.

The jaw-dropping cast list becomes even more incredible when you realise how many of the big names are playing themselves – and making themselves look silly in the process. Josh Hutcherson and Johnny Knoxville show up as the stars of *Duhpocalypse*, a horror-comedy film about zombie diarrhoea (whose prominent placement in the trailer is the reason the series made our radar...), while Olivia Wilde skewers her own reputation for being difficult.

> **"Remick isn't quite David Brent, but he's also not far off"**

The in-jokes and Easter eggs mean this is a show that rewards cinephilia. But the characters are also well-written and relatable enough that it won't alienate anyone less obsessed, while the comedy ranges from smart references to flat-out slapstick.

Is it ironic that this TV show ultimately turns out to be a celebration of Hollywood, warts and all? Maybe, but you'll definitely have added a few more films to your watchlist by the end of it. **Sarah Dobbs**

"How about '*Do* drink the Kool-Aid'? Anyone?"

ℹ Seth Rogen says that worrying about whether his heroes (like Scorsese) like him or not really does keep him up at night.

TEACUP

Don't cross the line!

★★★½☆

UK **Paramount+, streaming now, Fridays**

US **Peacock, streaming now**

Creator **Ian McCulloch**

Cast **Yvonne Strahovski, Scott Speedman, Caleb Dolden, Rob Morgan**

Flashforward: a pub somewhere in the UK, 2035.
Horror fan 1: "Remember *Teacup*?""
Horror fan 2: "That rings a bell... I get the feeling I liked it, but I can't remember anything about it."
HF1: "It was this horror thing about a group of people trapped on a ranch in Georgia – the state not the country – because someone's drawn a blue line around the place, and if they cross it, they die. Really bloodily."
HF 2: "Oh yeah. And it had some liquid that was like unicorn farts!"
HF 1: "Yeah, rainbow-coloured goo. Kinda cool."
HF 2: "Great film."
HF 1: "Wasn't a film."
HF 2: "I thought it was a James Wan film?"
HF 1: "Nah. He exec-produced it, but it was a TV series."
HF 2: "You sure? I remember it having some really gross body horror and not much plot – just a bunch of people trapped on a ranch by a killer forcefield with a body-hopping entity. That stretched to a series?"
HF 1: "Yeah, it was a bit like the blood test scene from John Carpenter's *The Thing* stretched out to eight episodes. But they were short episodes – most only just over half an hour. So if you binge-watch it, it's not much longer than *The Brutalist*. Though it'd probably have worked better as a 90-minute film, sure."
HF 2: "I remember liking it, though."
HF 1: "It was pretty good, pretty tight. Great cast, with that woman from *Chuck* as lead. Good tension. Couple of gnarly twists. But they ended it on a cliffhanger, and it got cancelled."
HF 2: "I hate it when they do that if they don't know whether they're gonna get another season. But why was it called *Teacup*?"
HF 1: "Strained metaphor, mate."
HF 2: "Tea-strainer metaphor?"
HF 1: "Get out." **Dave Golder**

> **"If you binge-watch it, it's not much longer than The Brutalist"**

"It's Wednesday so it's *my* go on the chair."

ℹ While the series is based on Robert R McCammon's 1988 book *Stinger*, Ian McCulloch reckons he changed 95% of it.

ANDOR Season Two

Going Rogue

SFX Loves

★★★★★

UK/US **Disney+, Wednesdays**

Creator/Showrunner **Tony Gilroy**

Cast **Diego Luna, Genevieve O'Reilly, Adria Arjona, Stellan Skarsgård**

EPISODES 2.01-2.12 **A prequel – or,** in *Andor*'s case, a prequel to a prequel – can be a difficult thing to pull off. With the ending already set in stone, drama can feel subservient to filling in gaps in canon, but this is definitely not the case with *Andor*.

The *Star Wars* show's brilliant second season seamlessly segues into *Rogue One* without ever letting the tension levels drop. Even though you have a rough idea of who might live or die (give or take a few surprises), *Andor* sustains a near-constant air of dread as Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) and the other Rebels try to stay one step ahead of the Empire. Remove the spaceships and the Stormtroopers and you'd still have a first-rate (and action-packed) political thriller.

The season plays out as four three-episode "chapters", each one focusing on a pivotal few days in the four years leading up to the now-famous Death Star reconnaissance mission. While the time-jumps inevitably necessitate a lot of talk, you barely notice as numerous complex storylines interweave.

The season also has a powerful throughline in the form of the ruthless Imperial occupation of the planet Ghorman. Anyone familiar with *Star Wars Rebels* will know this does not end well.

> **"Displays levels of brutality we've rarely seen before in Star Wars"**

"That's no moon, it's - oh no, hang on, it is. Soz."

Indeed, these episodes display levels of brutality we've rarely seen before in *Star Wars*, as the cruelty and sheer power of the Empire's military machine proves it's much scarier than the Sith Lord sitting on the throne doing his evil cackling.

The Rebels, meanwhile, make the point that you don't have to be nice (or even likeable) to be a hero. Every character in this show has nuance, and it's impossible to pick out a single standout performance.

So while *Star Wars* has been something of a mixed bag in the Disney era, *Andor* stands out as its crowning achievement.

Richard Edwards

i The Sankara stones from *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* cameoed in Luthen's shop in season one.

DAVID CRONENBERG

Killer kids and exploding heads

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1979/1981 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
Cast **Oliver Reed, Samantha Eggar, Art Hindle/Jennifer O'Neill, Stephen Lack, Patrick McGoohan**

Two of David Cronenberg's early films scrub up well for this pair of 4K releases.

The Brood ★★★½ is as close as he gets to autobiography, taking the stress of divorce and a custody battle and transmuting it into body horror. Well, it's cheaper than therapy. Oliver Reed plays the shrink peddling "psychoplasmics", a cultish technique which encourages patients to physically manifest their feelings; Art Hindle the father who learns that his estranged wife (Samantha Eggar) can do so to deadly effect...

The film's portrait of multi-generational trauma has won it fans, but the premise proves a little indigestible (spoilers ahoy). Materialising one homicidal baby? Okay... But spawning a room full of three-footers? And your mind gets stuck on questions like, "Who kitted them out in ski suits?" Still, it has some powerful moments, like the slaying of a teacher before a class of horrified preschoolers.

Scanners ★★★★★ – a tale of competing factions of telepaths – is a propulsive affair, which moves urgently from the exploding head for which it's notorious to a shotgun massacre, an exploding gas station, and a vein-bulging telekinetic duel.

Both Patrick McGoohan, as the mad scientist of the piece, and Michael Ironside, as the principal villain, impress – though their magnetism also serves to emphasise what a weak lead the aptly named Stephen Lack makes. Still, there's plenty else to admire here, including a brooding Howard Shore score, which blends mournful brass with Prophet 5 synth burbling.

Extras These Second Sight releases skimp on new bonuses, but carry over featurettes from their 2013 Blu-rays, plus further goodies from the German releases of 2018.

Oliver Reed looms large over **The Brood** ★★★★, with Hindle (20 minutes), producer Pierre David (11 minutes) and DOP Mark Irwin (14 minutes) variously recalling him stubbing out a cig on his tongue, getting arrested for a naked stroll, and "reeking of Scotch" after lunch.

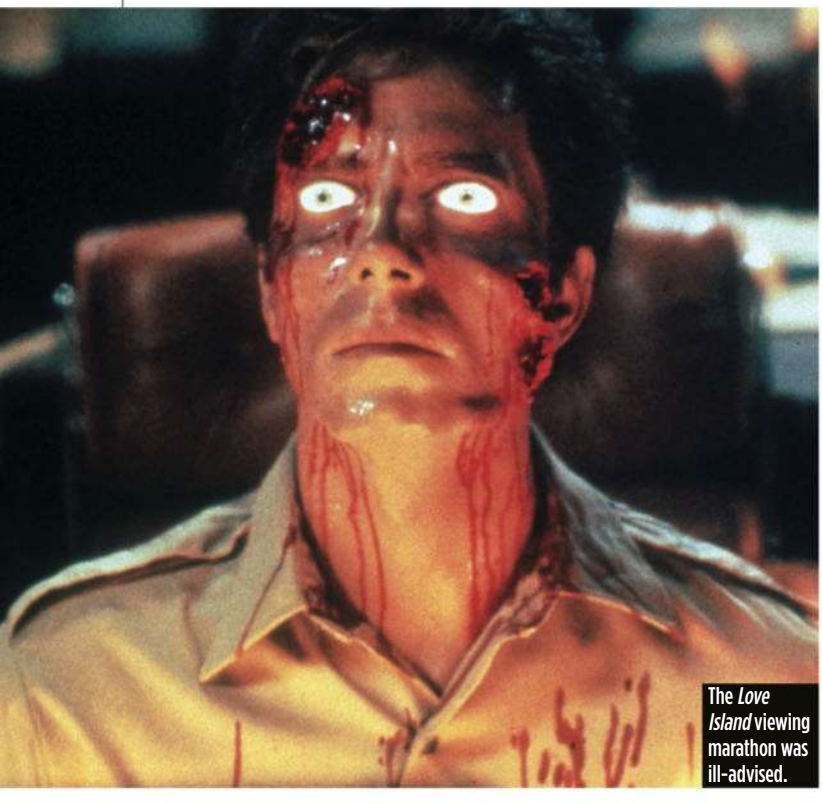
We also hear from Howard Shore (eight minutes), Cronenberg regular Robert A Silverman (10 minutes), and the director himself (13 minutes). New to this release: a chin-stroking critical commentary, (doubling the tally), and a video essay (22 minutes) comparing the depiction of rage to *28 Days Later*, *Hulk* and *Carrie*. Lord knows why.

> "The premise proves a little indigestible"

On **Scanners** ★★★★, Lack (24 minutes) and Ironside (31 minutes) both prove to be interesting characters in their very different (painter/blue collar guy) ways. Elsewhere, Irwin recalls an actor trying to get him sacked (15 minutes); two FX guys talk exploding heads (10/22 minutes); and we hear again from Shore (19 minutes) and David (14 minutes).

Scanners also adds a new critical commentary to complement an archival one, as well as a rather dry video essay (14 minutes) on "technology's role in human transmutation".

The dual-format Limited Editions of both releases come with six art cards and a 120-page book. **Ian Berriman**



The *Love Island* viewing marathon was ill-advised.

i The contacts Michael Ironside wears in *Scanners*' final shot were previously worn by Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man*.

NINE GUESTS FOR A CRIME

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 12 MAY
1977 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Ferdinando Baldi**
Cast **Arthur Kennedy, John Richardson, Caroline Laurence**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In this** entertainingly melodramatic Italian film, three couples, an aunt and the sailors steering their yacht are gradually bumped off on an island trip by person or persons unknown.

It's a giallo with an identity crisis. Gruesome shocks nudge it into horror territory. A wife's psychic pronouncements prime us to expect the supernatural, and soon a dead man – or his possessing spirit – is the prime suspect. And it opens as soapy sexploitation, as we observe a string of adulterous couplings.

Those experienced with this genre will probably guess the killer's identity early on (thanks to their use of a familiar trick). Implausible backstory is crudely deployed. And there's a fair amount of unintentional comedy – prepare to hoot at a body tumbling from a clifftop that's obviously a dummy. But that's all part of the horny, corny, bloody fun.

Extras Over four interviews (three new), this 88 Films edition supplies 112 minutes of chat, but you won't learn much about this movie. Star Massimo Foschi (quizzed twice) recalls little beyond "enjoying the swimming". DOP Sergio Rubini "doesn't have vivid memories". And designer Giovanni Licheri (paired with his wife, also a designer) barely mentions it – indeed, you learn more about TV variety shows... Plus: expert commentary; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU ALONE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 5 MAY
2024 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **DW Medoff**
Cast **Kenneth Trujillo, Katerina Eichenberger, Christopher Genovese, Kimberly Maxwell**

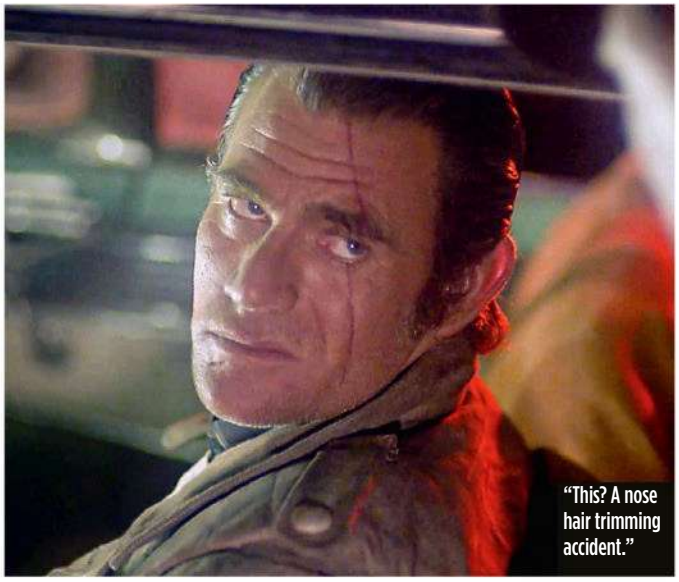
Newly paroled, a mute man accepts an offer to stay for six days in an allegedly cursed house to purge it of evil spirits.

As flashbacks chart a fracturing marriage that ended in tragedy, director DW Medoff slowly accumulates the dread, evoking a sense of not-rightness from the raw materials of dust, stillness and sunlight, along with a powerfully internalised performance by lead Kenneth Trujillo that hints at the damage within.

It's a story about grief told, at first, with empathy and restraint. Too soon it's undercut by jump scares and revelations, the tone ultimately pinwheeling between black comedy, folk horror and vicious splatter-fest. It might be an unreliable narrative from a broken mind; it might simply be a script that never quite coheres.

Extras There's an interview with Medoff (24 minutes), who gives some engaging insights into his filmmaking philosophy: "To me, horror is just drama with blood!" The director provides commentary on select scenes too (24 minutes). This Arrow Video release also includes three of Medoff's spooky short films: "AWOL" (six minutes), "I'm Down Here" (seven minutes) and "Yahrzeit" (six minutes), which all share style and themes with the main feature. Plus; trailer; booklet.

Nick Setchfield



"This? A nose hair trimming accident."

TRANCERS

Jumping Jack Deth

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1984 | 12 | 4K & Blu-ray
Director **Charles Band**
Cast **Tim Thomerson, Helen Hunt, Michael Stefani, Art LaFleur**

One of three films from Charles Band's Empire Pictures reviewed this issue, *Trancers* is the apogee of its output, thanks to neat concepts, a witty script, and art direction that makes a silk purse from a financial sow's ear.

A low-rent meld of *Blade Runner* and '40s noir, this time-travel tale sees Tim Thomerson's ex-cop, the improbably named Jack Deth, jumping back into the body of an ancestor in 1985 LA, in pursuit of a cult leader who's knocking off the forebears of the 23rd century's ruling council. This neon-lit future is so aesthetically appealing it's a shame we don't get to spend more time there.

The film moves at a fair clip, with tongue placed firmly in cheek throughout, and there are some memorable sequences – in one, Deth has to put down a shopping-centre Santa! A wristwatch that lets him freeze time for 10 seconds is another irresistible gimmick.

Thomerson nails it as the hard-boiled Deth, well stocked with laconic one-liners ("Dry hair is for squids!"). And there's strong support from love interest Lena (a young Helen Hunt), though their canoodling may put off some viewers, as the age gap looks more like 30 years than the actual 17...

Extras 101 Films' dual-format limited edition offers three new bonuses: interviews with Band (15 minutes), editor Ted Nicolaou (12 minutes), and a former *Fangoria* editor (18 minutes). Sadly these deal mostly in generalities, supplying no great revelations.

Short "Trancers: City Of Angels" – planned for a never-released 1988 anthology – is the highlight. It reunites five cast, and it's a joy to spend another 25 minutes with them. A 2007 commentary teams the director and Thomerson; Band's memory is poor, and it rather devolves into chuckling along. Further archival goodies include a decent Making Of (14 minutes) and a video essay appreciation (20 minutes). Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Charles Band unsuccessfully tried to hire screen legend Bette Davis for the role of High Council member Chairman Ashe.

PETER PAN'S NEVERLAND NIGHTMARE

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 28 APRIL
2025 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD
Director **Scott Chambers**
Cast **Martin Portlock, Megan Placito, Kit Green, Peter DeSouza-Feighoney**

The third film in the Twisted Childhood Universe improves on *Winnie-the-Pooh: Blood And Honey* and its sequel – but that's not saying much.

It's young Michael Darling's birthday and he's got a new bike. On a ride in the woods, however, he's abducted by Peter Pan (Martin Portlock), a circus clown who wants to take the boy to "Neverland". With the family falling apart, Michael's sister Wendy (Megan Placito) sets out to find Peter and bring her brother back.

The original Peter Pan story is a more natural fit for a horror adaptation than Pooh and his pals. There's an inherent creepiness to that tale which *Neverland Nightmare* initially seems like it might explore, and the prologue is genuinely eerie. Unfortunately, for most of its run it's simply a drab, grungy serial-killer film with a few hints of outré weirdness.

That said, the direction, acting, sets and effects are solid – and given how rough *Blood And Honey* looked, that's something. Portlock is effective as Peter, and when the film goes for the gore, it delivers.

A step towards competence, then, but *Neverland Nightmare* is neither memorably strange nor scary enough to give you nightmares of your own.

Extras None. **Will Salmon**

FREAKY TALES

To Live And Die In Oakland

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Download

Directors **Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck**

Cast **Pedro Pascal, Jay Ellis, Normani, Ben Mendelsohn**

Captain Marvel directors Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck follow up their MCU mega-hit with this decidedly old-fashioned anthology.

Freaky Tales tells four interconnected stories, all taking place in the same patch of Oakland, California in 1987. In the first chapter, punk kids band together to protect their club from some Nazi skinheads. In the second, two female rappers have a shot at the big time – if they can win a rap battle.

Pedro Pascal plays a grief-stricken enforcer confronting the costs of his actions in the third chapter, while the final instalment wraps things up with a bloody revenge yarn.

The genre elements are minimal, though there are small moments of full-blown fantasy. Instead, this is a likeable pastiche of '80s cinema: severed heads roll, blood squirts, and cartoony sound effects pop off the screen. It's knowingly retro, but commendably honest about the grimmer aspects of the era, with racism and misogyny the common enemies here.

It's all so loose and low-key, though, that you could easily mistake it for a first feature if it weren't for the inclusion of stars like Pascal, Ben Mendelsohn, and a droll Tom Hanks. Fun, but not especially freaky. **Will Salmon**

i Pascal had a stab at doing an Oakland accent, but native Ryan Fleck told him "Um, talk more like yourself."

In the '80s, everyone smoked. Quite badly.

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Download

You know the story: father boasts daughter can spin straw into gold, king says "Prove it or I'll behead her", daughter makes deal with the Devil. This micro-budget horror is a straightforward adaptation of the fairy tale, just as the Brothers Grimm wrote it down. The only difference? You can't show it to kids – it's way too sweary for that.

Bizarrely, there are no other attempts to make it more adult: no extra thematic resonance, no gore, no sex. It's just a sweary fairy tale. Fine, but it's hard to know who it's for. **Sarah Dobbs**

SHRUNKEN HEADS

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1994 | 15 | Blu-ray

Forbidden Zone helmer Richard Elfman brings a gonzo energy and a pinch of Joe Dante to this '90s horror comedy.

Three geeky kids tangle with neighbourhood hoodlums. Shot dead, they're resurrected by a friendly voodoo sorcerer and then unleashed upon the streets as shrivel-headed spirits of vengeance.

It's an outrageous premise and Elfman fully commits, creating something so charmingly daft and bonkers you can only applaud his gall.

Extras Vintage Making Of, trailer. **Nick Setchfield**

A KNIGHT'S WAR

★☆☆☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

Director, co-writer and co-star Matthew Ninaber creates a vision of screen hell here, though probably not the way he intended.

From an opening scene in which a woman is burned at the stake, this small-scale swords-and-sorcery nonsense is unrelentingly bleak and gruesome. As brave knight Bhodie (Jeremy Ninaber) dies again and again, the over-earnest dialogue and incoherent, bad videogame plotting mean you share his pain throughout.

Extras None. **Richard Edwards**

WACKO

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1982 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The '80s slasher** boom inspired several spoofs. Here, a loony's on the loose 13 years after the "Lawnmower Killer" murders. Will he strike again at the Halloween prom?

Riffing not only on the likes of *Halloween* but also *Alien*, *Psycho*, *The Omen*, *Saturday Night Fever* and more, *Wacko* takes a "throw everything at the wall" approach. The odd thing sticks (like a "Gates Of Hell: Employees Only" sign), but most of it slides straight down. For ageing fratboys only.

Extras Commentary; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

FRÉWAKA

The doors of perception

★★★★☆

RELEASED 25 APRIL
2025 | N/A | SVOD
Director Aislinn Clarke
Cast Clare Monnelly, Bríd Ní Neachtain, Aleksandra Bystrzhitskaya

SHUDDER **In cinema shock and** revulsion are easy wins. What's harder is unease, the kind of glimmering dread conjured by a lingering shot of a bolted door or six words as plain but ingeniously disturbing as "There's a house under the house...".

The haunting second feature by writer/director Aislinn Clarke builds on the style and themes of 2018's equally skin-prickling *The Devil's Doorway*. This Irish-language horror stars Clare Monnelly as Shoo, a care worker assigned to an elderly recluse who has fortified her home with totems against a seemingly supernatural force. Is Peig (Bríd Ní Neachtain) a victim of fracturing sanity, or are her fears grounded in something truly real?

Fréwaka offers no immediate answers, finding its chill in ambiguity and imagery that's as slippery as a dream. Its colours are muted, its mood tangible, oppressive. Steeped in paranoia, it's a film about guilt and grief – both personal and historical – but one that's anchored in something human, with strong, authentic performances from its two leads.

There will be inevitable comparisons to *The Wicker Man* and *Midsommar*, but this masterclass in disquiet has as much David Lynch in its veins as folk horror.

Nick Setchfield

i The title of the film derives from the Irish word "fréamhacha", which roughly translates into "roots" in English.

"God, I could really bosh a Pot Noodle right now."

THE HOUSE OF THE DEVIL

Satanic Panic

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 MAY
2009 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director Ti West
Cast Jocelin Donahue, Greta Gerwig, Tom Noonan, Mary Woronov

Before *X*, *Pearl* and *MaXXXine* brought horror auteur Ti West into the mainstream, this charming slow-burn shocker offered a tantalising hint at things to come. While not West's first film, its classic aesthetic – shot on gloriously grainy 16mm, with West deliberately aping the stylistic choices of early '80s horror – was a marked evolution from his debut, *The Roost*.

Sam Hughes (Jocelin Donahue) is a cash-strapped student who, against the better judgement of her friend Megan (a young Greta Gerwig), takes a "babysitting" job that means spending the night in a spooky old house with a troubled older woman. Slowly, she begins to realise what we've known all along: there's something evil in this house. It's a slight plot, but West makes up for that by conjuring an atmosphere of rising dread. It's set in the '80s in the midst of the Satanic Panic, and you always know that something infernal is about to take place, but it's not until the final scene that everything clicks into place.

Jocelin Donahue, meanwhile, makes for a kick-ass scream queen, handy with her fists and more than capable of taking out a cultist or two.

It's another lovely summer's day in Hull.

Extras New material comes in the form of a wealth of lengthy retrospective interviews with West (19 minutes), Donahue (17 minutes), actor AJ Bowen (26 minutes), producers Peter Phok (24 minutes) and Larry Fessenden (28 minutes), DoP Eliot Rockett (14 minutes), composer Jeff Grace (16 minutes), and sound designer Graham Reznick (25 minutes).

Two commentaries are ported over from the previous Blu-ray release, one by West and Donahue, and one featuring West, Fessenden, Phok and Reznick. You also get a from-the-period Making Of featuring a young-looking West (24 minutes), an evocatively edited behind-the-scenes featurette (20 minutes), a few inessential deleted scenes (seven minutes), and a trailer. The Limited Edition version comes with a 70-page booklet and six art cards.

Will Salmon

i The day after filming one Satanic scene, the camera and a generator broke, and lightning struck a tree by the location.

NIGHT TRAIN MURDERS

Horror Express

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 28 APRIL

1975 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Aldo Lado**

Cast **Irene Miracle, Laura D'Angelo, Flavio Bucci, Macha Méril**

This is a beautiful new transfer of a film with a pretty ugly subject matter. *Night Train Murders* was originally refused a certificate by the BBFC in 1976, and later found itself on the infamous "video nasties" list. And no wonder – it's a fairly vicious rape and revenge film released, in part, to cash in on the success of Wes Craven's *The Last House On The Left* a few years previously.

Margaret (Irene Miracle) and Lisa (Laura D'Angelo) are two young women taking an overnight train from Munich to Italy. Along the way they encounter a pair of small time crooks and a creepy nameless woman (Macha Méril). Then things get nasty...

In terms of subject matter, this is about as grim as you might expect, but there is more to it than just sadism. Director Aldo Lado is commendably restrained in what he shows, saving the film from slipping into leery exploitation cinema tropes and layering in some subtle class commentary along the way. And while the villains get their comeuppance, as the genre dictates, the final act leaves a bitter aftertaste and a lingering sense of the horrible futility of violence.

Extras There are interviews with Aldo Lado (22 minutes – an old one recorded as part of a podcast), Irene Miracle (22 minutes), Macha Méril (33 minutes), and film historian Stephen Thrower (28 minutes). Miracle also discusses her other Italian films (four minutes).

> **"The final act leaves a bitter aftertaste"**

Further features on this 88 Films release offer a career retrospective of Aldo Lado (32 minutes), a guide to Italian rape revenge films (34 minutes), a fairly general video essay on the film (18 minutes), and another on the collision of sex and power on-screen (22 minutes). Two Italian cinema experts provide an insightful commentary. Plus: trailers; gallery. The dual-format Limited Edition comes with a booklet and an art card. **Will Salmon**

"It's Wes Craven. He sounds pretty angry."

CINEMATIC / ALAMY

ℹ The film was also released as *The New House On The Left* and *Second House On The Left*, despite being set on a train!

FOUR SIDED TRIANGLE

Double trouble

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1953 | PG | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Terence Fisher**

Cast **Stephen Murray, Barbara Payton, James Hayter, John Van Eyssen**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Some claim 1955's** *The Quatermass Xperiment* as Hammer's first foray into the darkly fantastical, but this comparatively obscure B-picture beat it by two years.

Based on a novel by William F Temple, it's set in a bucolic English village where two scientists invent the technology to replicate any object – or person. Driven by an unreciprocated crush, one of the boffins sets out to duplicate their lab assistant (a magnetic Barbara Payton in full '50s peroxide bombshell mode).

Part romantic potboiler, part post-atomic parable on the ethical perils of science, it has a literate script – "A paradox is only a truth standing on its head to attract attention" is a line to cherish – and crisp direction by future Hammer stalwart Terence Fisher, whose use of stark lighting at a crucial moment has a touch of Expressionist cinema. And the lab set, all wormy tubes, bubbling jars and bulldog clips, looks like a dress rehearsal for the sinister experiments of Baron Frankenstein himself.

Extras There's a choice of audio commentaries by film historians: Melanie Williams paired with Thirza Wakefield and Kevin Lyons with Jonathan Rigby. William Fowler and Vic Pratt discuss the perversity at the heart of the film and make a case for its place in "Home Counties horror" (28 minutes), while Neil Sinyard tells us how it anticipates Hammer's later output while nodding to such classics as *Metropolis* and *Vertigo* (18 minutes).

Elsewhere Lucy Bolton provides an illuminating look at the career of star Barbara Payton, celebrating her talent while recounting a deeply troubled life (28 minutes).

Plus: silent trailer elements (two minutes), and an extensive image gallery. This dual-format Collector's Edition is packaged with a double-sided poster, two leaflets reproducing original publicity materials, and a 120-page book on the film that includes a fascinating look at Hammer's ultimately abandoned plans to remake it in the '90s. **Nick Setchfield**

Franz Kafka's Punch and Judy show was a slog.

ℹ Serving in the Second World War, William F Temple lost a draft of *Four Sided Triangle* while in the Battle of Anzio.

A SAMURAI IN TIME

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 28 APRIL

2024 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Junichi Yasuda**

Cast **Makiya Yamaguchi, Norimasa Fuke, Yuno Sakura**

This Japanese indie won Best Film at their equivalent of the Oscars last month. That's a heartwarming human story – writer/director/DOP Junichi Yasuda, whose day job is rice farming, is the quintessential plucky underdog – but rather surprising. It's not a bad film, just an inconsequential one.

Makiya Yamaguchi plays a samurai who's facing off with an opponent when a lightning strike catapults him to the modern day. Waking up on the set of a period drama, he eventually puts his sword skills to use as a jobbing stuntman.

For most of the film's two hour-plus duration it barely skims the surface of this concept, with huge depths left unexplored. Our hero adjusts with great equanimity, and a bare minimum of fish-out-of-water bewilderment.

A second-half pivot injects a little conflict, as we learn what happened to the opponent... But you won't learn much about the Edo period, or Japan's TV and film industry. And it looks bland, having the squeaky-clean feel of a TV movie. Given the circumstances of production (including a crew of just 10), it's still a heroic effort, though.

Extras A chat between two of the leads (31 minutes) and a director interview (16 minutes) convey how everyone mucked in. Plus: two superfluous deleted scenes (seven minutes); trailers. **Ian Berriman**

THE INCUBUS

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1982 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **John Hough**

Cast **John Cassavetes, Kerrie Keane, Helen Hughes, Erin Noble**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This bleak** Canadian supernatural horror was based on a 1976 novel by Ray Russell. Though it uses killer's POV tropes, and is part of 88 Films' Slasher Classics Collection range, it's altogether more sober and grown-up than your average *Friday The 13th* knock-off.

That's in part thanks to a slumming-it John Cassavetes, who brings intensity to the role of a small-town MD, and partly because the killings plaguing Galen – which has a history of witch hunters – involve horrific rapes. There's no graphic detail, but the descriptions used alone ("ruptured uterus" practically becomes a catchphrase) may make sensitive viewers blanch.

The boyfriend of the doctor's daughter is soon in the frame, but the killer's red sperm and inhuman strength (capable of crushing spines "like balsa" and breaking down a toilet door – er, you sure about that one?) imply something demonic.

Incubus is a moody affair, and Brit John Hough (a veteran of the likes of *Twins Of Evil*) delivers the odd artful moment, like a victim's distorted face as she's pressed against glass.

Unfortunately, the muddy plotting doesn't make much sense, especially once you've had time to turn the final reveal around in your mind.

Extras Film writer David Flint provides a commentary that's sympathetic but not especially insightful. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

CREEPOZOIDS

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1987 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **David DeCoteau**

Cast **Linnea Quigley, Ken Abraham, Michael Aranda, Richard S Hawkins**

The pennies were pinched so hard they must have been the thickness of foil in this emission from the Empire Pictures stable, which conveys a post-apocalyptic future by sticking its characters inside for almost the entire duration.

Sheltering from acid rain six years after a nuclear war, five deserters stumble upon an abandoned facility formerly home to a genetic experiment. Soon they're being picked off by a slimy HR Giger-esque beast.

The old-school effects are the principal reason to watch. Besides the rubbery creature suit, we're treated to a creepy mutant baby and a dog-sized rat – with cast holding the latter to their throats à la Bela Lugosi wrestling a rubber octopus.

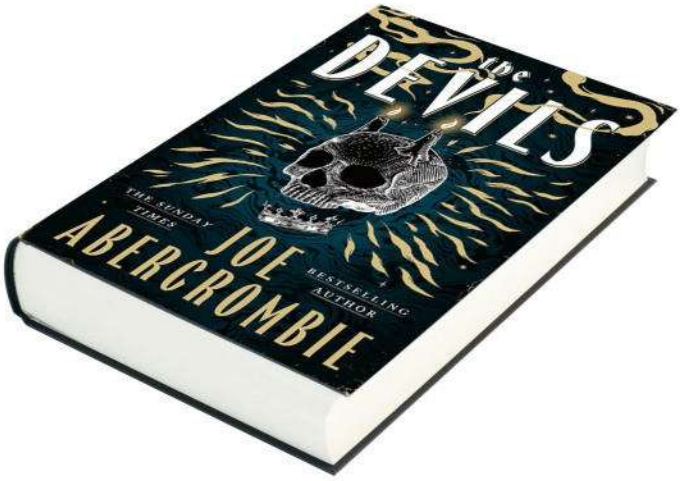
Sadly, the story is awfully underdeveloped. The exact purpose of the project is one abiding mystery; others include why dry ice is omnipresent, and why the creature doesn't kill everyone half an hour earlier.

Presumably as that wouldn't fill 72 minutes – far too much of which is wasted watching people traversing ventilation shafts so roomy you could comfortably stand upright. Look out for "employee files" which list names like Roger Corman and Forrest Ackerman.

Extras This 101 Films edition offers no upgrade on 88 Films' 2017 release – director David DeCoteau's informative, likeably self-deprecating commentary dates back to that. Plus: a gallery. **Ian Berriman**

ROUND UP

Released digitally last year, **THE COFFEE TABLE** (28 April, Blu-ray) is a dark, often bleakly comic Spanish drama centred on a bickering middle-aged couple with a newborn. We said: "Essentially one long, horribly tense wait for the revelation of a secret the audience are in on." The Limited Edition comes with critical commentary, three interviews, a video essay, two shorts, a 120-page book and six art cards. Michelle Yeoh returns as Philippa Georgiou in standalone movie **SECTION 31** (28 April, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), leading a maverick squad tasked with tracking down a bioweapon. We said: "A numbskull actionfest that has zero interest in high-minded philosophising... A decent amount of undemanding fun." Extras: five featurettes and a gag reel. In **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) Sonic and pals must stop alien hedgehog Shadow (Keanu Reeves) getting control of a laser cannon, a race which leads to London. We said: "Too often mistakes frenetic hyperactivity for satisfying entertainment." Extras: commentary, eight featurettes, deleted scenes, a gag reel, and a short. In Leigh Whannell's **WOLF MAN** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), a chap takes his family to sort out his late father's farmhouse, then gets clawed by a mysterious beast... We said: "Never quite attains the level of emotional devastation it's reaching for." Bonus features: four featurettes (31 minutes), and commentary by the director. Finally, the latest TV box sets are **BEACON 23** Season Two (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 May) and **DUNE: PROPHECY** Season One (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 12 May).



THE DEVILS

The Trojan Princess Diaries

★★★★☆

RELEASED 6 MAY
576 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Joe Abercrombie**
Publisher **Gollancz**

My Fair Lady* meets *The Suicide Squad in the first volume of Joe Abercrombie's new fantasy series. No one is more surprised than she is when Alex, a street urchin and very small-time petty crook, learns that her true identity is Alexia Pyrogennetos, the long-lost daughter of the late Empress Irene and heir to the Serpent Throne of Troy. However, before the very surprised royal heiress can be installed on the throne that's rightfully hers, there's the small matter of travelling across Europe while navigating assassin attempts, local wars and the hostile attentions of Alex's newfound cousins, who all fancy the throne for themselves.

To keep the princess safe, she's entrusted to the guardianship of the priest Brother Diaz and the Chapel Of The Holy Expediency. This covert organisation is commanded by a world-weary knight called Jakob of Thorn, whose membership includes ancient vampire Baron Rikard, uncontrollable werewolf Vigga, narcissist necromancer Balthazar and a lonely elf called Sunny.

Abercrombie sets a brisk pace, dropping readers straight into the thick of it without preamble, setting the characters and plot into motion with a chase through the streets and alleys of a bustling city. The world-building is expansive, and the plot tugs on threads that tie the adventure to big ideas about a schism in the church, the second coming of the Saviour (a female Christ figure) and an impending apocalypse – conceits that seem likely to figure in subsequent volumes.

The tone is generally light and tends towards the playful, as mortal danger is typically faced with a wry sense of detachment. Abercrombie's prose is always engaging and energetic. The action scenes are written with pace, bite and a palpable sense of the chaos of combat.

Abercrombie creates inventive backdrops that add variety and danger to each battle, from a violent encounter in a country inn to a desperate fight on a sinking ship and a gruesome showdown in an abandoned nunnery.

The storytelling jumps from character to character, allowing each member of the ensemble space to explore their history, personality and motives. There are unexpected facets to the unlikeliest characters, like the pompous, self-aggrandising Balthazar, with the notable exceptions of Baron Rikard, who remains comparatively remote and alien, and Jacob's lieutenant Baptiste, who feels underwritten next to the other characters. It's the downtrodden outsiders that emerge as the most engaging, sympathetic characters, with Vigga and Sunny grappling with the fear and hatred that they inspire.

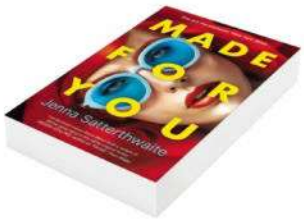
While this is an ensemble piece, the two primary characters are Alex and Brother Diaz – at least in terms of the transformations they undergo through the course of their travels and travails. There's something of Eliza Doolittle in Alex, plucked from the gutter and thrust to the very top of society, all the while struggling with her debilitating lack of self-worth. She's plucky and likeable from the outset, while it takes longer to warm up to Brother Diaz, who begins the tale as an unctuous sycophant greedy for a promotion.

> **"Abercrombie's prose is engaging and energetic"**

Rather than romance, there are sprinklings of sexual attraction – and the occasional coupling – on the road to Troy. And yet Abercrombie's world is one that demands compromise and sacrifice from its erstwhile heroes. There's little room for idealistic love, and despite the rakish humour, the ending is surprisingly downbeat, the end of the mission laced with the bitter tang of regret.

Like The Suicide Squad, the members of the Chapel Of Holy Expediency are press-ganged into service, their survival is not guaranteed and their happiness is not even an afterthought. But it's their flaws, quarrels and failings that make them and their struggles to install an empress so enjoyable. **David West**

i The site of Troy at Hisarlik, Turkey, was first proposed by Charles Maclaren, founder of *The Scotsman* newspaper, in 1822.



MADE FOR YOU

★★★★☆

RELEASED 29 APRIL
352 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Jenna Satterthwaite**
Publisher **Verve Books**

This thought-provoking mystery thriller is the latest addition to the small but growing subgenre of reality TV-inspired sci-fi.

Its narrator is Julia, a contestant on a smash-hit show that bears an uncanny resemblance to *The Bachelor*. She's different to the other women looking to win their happily ever afters – she's a synthetic person purpose-built to attract too-good-to-be-true singleton Josh.

Chapters alternate between the past and present as debut author Jenna Satterthwaite skilfully interweaves Julia and Josh's very public courtship with the aftermath of his subsequent disappearance. Is she guilty of his murder, or – in a world mistrustful of Synths – simply the most convenient suspect?

Made For You isn't always subtle, with world-building that feels a little too on-the-nose and romantic encounters that wouldn't feel out of place in a bonkbuster. But as the two timelines coalesce in the final act, it becomes both a pacy page-turner and a powerful satire on 21st-century sexism and misogyny. What kind of twisted world would create a Synth who can think, love and even have children, but allow her to remain the property of the company that built her? Satterthwaite keeps the righteous anger simmering while ensuring that Julia is someone you never stop rooting for. **Richard Edwards**

LOVE AND OTHER PARADOXES

★★★½☆

RELEASED 24 APRIL

320 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Catriona Silvey**

Publisher **HarperCollins**

If you discovered how your life was going to pan out in the future, would it affect the way you behave today? And could that change in behaviour then cause a timey-wimey paradox that would stop it from ever happening?

This is the dilemma faced by Cambridge University student Joe Greene. He dreams of becoming a world-famous poet, but after bumping into a time traveller from the future, he discovers that this actually *is* his destiny. As he grapples with the news, he realises that his future fame stems from him falling in love with a fellow student, Diana. Should he introduce himself to her now? Or would that disrupt his future? Time traveller Esi, meanwhile, is on a mission of her own and needs his help.

It's a cheerfully chewy premise, and Joe is a believable recipient of this future knowledge, behaving quite logically after hearing the news. Yet he's also a big ol' dumb idiot, and you may figure out plot twists long before he does – he really should watch more time-travel movies. His relationships with both Esi and Diana are fleshed out well, too, although not as well as Cambridge itself. This is, more than anything else, a love letter to the city and life at the university in the early 2000s, providing another kind of time travel to enjoy. **Jayne Nelson**

THE CURE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

300 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Eve Smith**

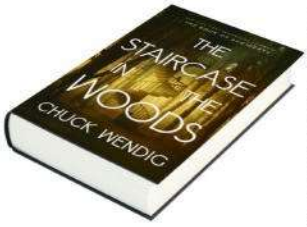
Publisher **Orenda Books**

A treatment that slows down the ageing process opens a Pandora's box of ethical, social and political controversies in Eve Smith's near-future thriller.

An annual rejuvenation procedure that staves off old age has led to overpopulation and government-enforced euthanasia at age 120. The rich, however, can pay for a black market one-off treatment, making them "Superjuves" who then avoid the death sentence in various illicit ways. But the murder of a Superjuve forces the detective looking into the case to team up with the now-reclusive scientist who unwittingly created the rejuvenation treatment.

With the main storyline concentrating on the investigation, flashbacks and archive news reports flesh out the 80-year history of the rejuve process. The book starts off in sprightly fashion – it's a pacy noirish thriller in a richly detailed future, with two intriguing female leads, which raises some thought-provoking issues. The odd bit of on-the-nose satire (a billionaire called Jeff Busk – *really*?) and oddly florid prose ("This case is unearthing a veritable ossuary of infamy") are minor problems.

But in its last third the book falls apart, with a Bond villain in a futuristic lair revealing an overcomplicated plot. It feels like a movie adaptation that's abandoned the heart of the novel for a blockbuster climax. **Dave Golder**



THE STAIRCASE IN THE WOODS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 29 APRIL

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Chuck Wendig**

Publisher **Del Rey**

You've probably seen the stories online. People stumble across staircases in the middle of nowhere – just sitting there, not leading anywhere. The creepypasta has it that anyone who climbs such staircases will never be heard from again.

Unfortunately for the five teens in Wendig's new horror novel, there was no Reddit to warn them back in 1998. One drunken night, Matty dares his friends to climb a staircase in the woods near their small town. When they refuse, he does it himself. And, sure enough, he vanishes.

Fast forward twentyish years, and the friends he left behind – super-smart Lauren, nervous Owen, even-tempered Hamish and spiky Nick – find themselves drawn to another staircase. This time, they'll all find out what awaits them beyond the top step.

Despite the architectural theme, the book has more in common with Stephen King's *IT* than Mark Z Danielewski's *House Of Leaves*. It's about trauma, childhood friendships and the ways the world wears us down. The evils beyond the staircase are scary, but in a way where the real horror is inside each character's own head.

It's upsetting rather than frightening, but with a dollop of optimism too. You'll definitely think twice about climbing unknown staircases in future. **Sarah Dobbs**

DEATH AND OTHER OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

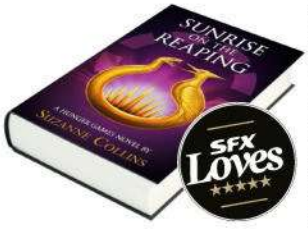
Author **Veronika Dapunt**

Publisher **Bantam**

After millennia feeling undervalued, Death decides to take a sabbatical on Earth in the guise of a human. Initially she's none too enamoured with the corporeal identity her sister, Life, chooses for her: a female lawyer in a struggling legal firm. But when she learns of a death that doesn't conform to god's great plan, it proves the perfect disguise for investigating a unholy whodunnit with existential repercussions. Chief suspect is Satan, or the VP of Pandemonium and Perdition as he's known these days, but he would be, wouldn't he?

This fast-paced supernatural comedy doesn't have quite the satirical bite of Terry Pratchett, the unhinged lunacy of Robert Rankin or the ingenious word play of Douglas Adams, but instead combines elements of all three, with a pinch of Sophie Kinsella light romance and consumerism. It's a highly readable slice of awfully British daftness, though it's more a constant grin of a novel than an occasional belly laugh one.

There's the nagging feeling Dapunt hasn't quite been meticulous in her world-building – or performed the literary smoke and mirrors required so you don't notice (how could Death be present at the demise of *all* creatures?) – but there's more to enjoy here than nitpick over. **Dave Golder**



SUNRISE ON THE REAPING

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Suzanne Collins**

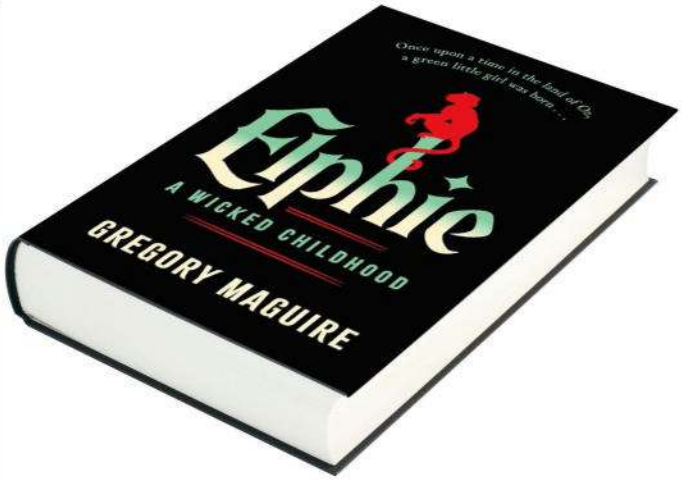
Publisher **Scholastic**

When Katniss Everdeen meets Haymitch Abernathy in *The Hunger Games*, he's a booze-soaked nihilist. In her eyes, he's frustratingly unhelpful: a former winner who thinks she has no chance of survival and isn't invested in improving her odds. Over the course of Suzanne Collins's trilogy, he finds purpose and redeems himself in Katniss's (and our) eyes. Thanks to this prequel, he's about to become everyone's favourite character.

Sixteen-year-old Haymitch is resourceful, optimistic, and in love. He's as happy as anyone in District 12 can be... until he's selected for the 50th Hunger Games. As it's an anniversary year, twice as many kids get thrown into this kill-or-be-killed game, and after challenging President Snow during the run up to the Games, Haymitch becomes a target for the horrors of the arena.

If you're not already a *Hunger Games* fan, this isn't the place to start. Foreknowledge heightens the story's poignancy – we know Haymitch will win, but at what cost? – while appearances from other key characters answer questions you didn't even know you had.

As a standalone story of rebellion against a fascist regime, this novel feels timely. But the way it adds depth and tragedy to an already beloved character makes it Collins's masterpiece. **Sarah Dobbs**



ELPHIE: A WICKED CHILDHOOD

Green around the gills

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

288 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Gregory Maguire**

Publisher **Headline Publishing**

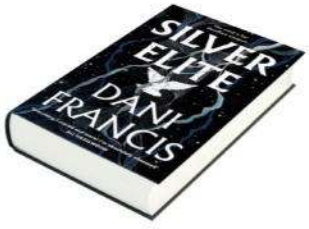
For those who have only experienced the *Wicked* story – Elphaba's in particular – via being fans of the stage musical or the successful film, let this be a buyer beware moment. Not because Gregory Maguire's original novels are ever bad per se, just very different. Less "Defying Gravity", more defying expectations.

It's not surprising that another book in the author's Oz series (which launched in 1995 and has since expanded to four in total, not including this one) has arrived, given the renewed interest. But if you don't care for prequels, *Elphie* may not do all that much to change your mind. Turning the clock back to Elphaba's toddler days through her pre-Shiz teenage struggles, it's a typically esoteric dip into her mindset that will feel both familiar (if you've read the previous novels) or strange (if this is your first time with the books). Maguire goes for rumination over much in the way of action, though there is a kidnapping plot and we see Elphaba finding work for the first time, the latter of which is much less thrilling.

Perhaps the biggest issue here is that little of what is presented feels in any way essential. We know exactly how young "Elphie" felt towards her sister Nessarose, and Maguire's endless references to how her father was a pious preacher and her mother a frequently adulterous rich girl with a love of public nudity quickly become repetitive.

Even if you're a completist who has read the other Oz-set tomes, you're unlikely to find much here that you hadn't already guessed, and the way it's presented is frequently reliant on verbose descriptions of plants and animals, and seems destined to turn off latecomers. It's one thing to peer deeply into the thoughts of a complicated character; it's disappointing when that happens without any real revelation or justification. Presumably a riff on Glinda's privileged time as a spoiled brat is next? **James White**

i Maguire's own youth influenced Elphaba's; his mother died in childbirth, and he was sent to an orphanage.



SILVER ELITE

★★★★½

RELEASED 6 MAY

528 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Dani Francis**

Publisher **Del Rey**

A dystopian society where people with supernatural powers are hunted and killed? Check. A rebellion operating under the noses of an authoritarian regime? Check. A female-led, enemies-to-lovers tale with lashings of steamy sex? Check.

No points for originality, then, but even if you've read stories like this a thousand times before, you'll be sucked into *Silver Elite* with the force of the tornado that whisked Dorothy away to Oz. That's because debut author Dani Francis knows how to dish out tense, pacy worldbuilding.

Wren Darlington is our narrator: a Mod (psychic) forced into training for a group known as Silver Elite – soldiers who kill her kind. Able to pass as an ordinary human, Wren is undercover for the resistance. However, the one thing she *can't* resist is Commander Cross Redden, described so regularly in terms of his sex appeal and vast physical prowess – think Henry Cavill crossed with Alan Ritchson's Jack Reacher – that he's basically nothing more than a giant talking penis.

Yes, this is hormone-soaked, clichéd and filled with *Hunger Games*-style plotting. But it's also a bloody good read. The characters are convincing, the dialogue is snappy and there's enough momentum to keep you enthralled until the final words. Be wary, though: cold showers may be necessary after certain chapters. **Jayne Nelson**

SOME BODY LIKE ME

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Lucy Lapinska**

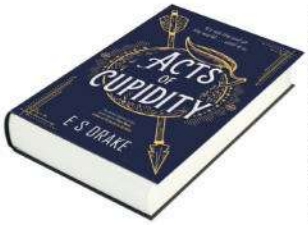
Publisher **Gollancz**

The creation of human-like robots – synths, androids, cyborgs or, in this case, Personal Computer Companions – isn't new, nor is exploration of their rights and possible autonomy. But this novel, the adult debut from a bestselling children's/YA author, is a worthy addition to the genre.

It begins from the viewpoint of "Abigail", a PCC created in the image of her owner's dead wife, and expected to act as her every day. David has created many Rules that she has to follow, but that's about to change, as Emancipation Day is nearing, when all PCCs will get full rights. Until then, though, they are still property.

All this is set against the slow coming of the end of the world; it's an Earth so polluted that within a decade it will be unable to support human life. PCCs are the future of the planet, and some humans still aren't happy about the idea.

It's an intriguing setup, and delivers on every point, from Abigail's dawning awareness and relationships with those around her – a friendship with her neighbour's "wife" and "daughter" PCCs is especially poignant – and the love story that evolves through the novel, to the almost casual acceptance of the damage we have done, and continue to do, to the planet that should sustain us. A compelling, and very human, read. **Rhian Drinkwater**



ACTS OF CUPIDITY

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **ES Drake**

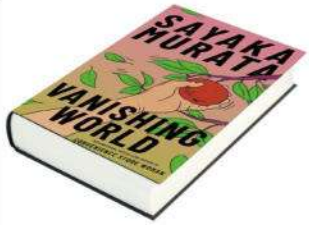
Publisher **Zaffre**

In humorous fantasies, the afterlife is invariably a banal, bureaucratic and rule-governed place, and *Acts Of Cupidity* does little to buck the trend. At least the main characters this time are a little different; not angels, demons or ghosts, but Cupids. Yes, they have wings and arrows. No, they don't have outsized nappies.

They're the formerly living, repurposed as agents of love, tasked with making sure the right love matches come about. But when recently deceased new recruit (and former journalist) Nikita is assigned former cop Erron and his partner Casey, an 18th century doctor, as her mentors, her training is cut short when prospective lovers keep dying.

ES Drake's debut novel is a workmanlike screwball fantasy with some good ideas, effective moments and fun characters, but bares its influences a little too blatantly. Casey and Erron are faintly disguised surrogates of *Good Omens*' Aziraphale and Crowley, and that's far from the only Pratchett fan-fiction vibe.

It also suffers from infodumpitis (the first 50 pages supply almost pure exposition before a semblance of a plot kicks in), a distracting prose style that flips randomly between viewpoints, and some strained cultural references ("faster than Max Verstappen could get round the Monaco circuit"). Not love at first read then, but it's amiable enough fluff. **Dave Golder**



VANISHING WORLD

★★★½☆

RELEASED 24 APRIL

240 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Sayaka Murata**

Publisher **Granta Books**

Even in the weirdest of sci-fi worlds, storytellers tend to use familiar human notions like family as a shorthand to help us relate to alien characters. *Vanishing World* (originally published in Japan back in 2015) flips that cosy notion on its head, as author Sayaka Murata rewrites the rules of love and marriage.

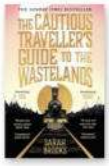
In her alternative present, old-school sex is falling out of fashion, and is considered incest if it takes place between spouses. Instead, people get their kicks by masturbating to anime characters, or through societally acceptable affairs. Marriage mostly exists to raise families, with all kids conceived via artificial insemination.

The story's narrated by Amane, who's always had an unconventional attitude to the birds and the bees – not least because her mum keeps reminding her she was made the old-fashioned way.

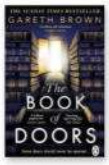
For most of its duration, the book is more speculative than sci-fi, as Amane navigates various awkward social situations (her descriptions of sex are unconventionally mechanical), but shifts gears when she ends up in a community where men can have babies. It's a strange and at times disconcerting read that keeps you questioning many of the conventions of the modern world. The plot is a little on the light side, but with its tight page count, *Vanishing World* never gets a chance to outstay its welcome. **Richard Edwards**

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks is Sarah Brooks's **THE CAUTIOUS TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO THE WASTELANDS** (★★★★★, 1 May, W&N). Set in the late 19th century, it centres on a journey via



the Great Trans-Siberian Express, from Moscow to Beijing, through an uncanny landscape which passengers are warned not to spend too long gazing at... We said: "Brooks's crisp style and striking visual imagination make the Wastelands a hypnotic blend of menace and beauty, and she builds tension with a light touch." In Gareth Brown's **THE BOOK OF DOORS** (★★★½☆, out now, Penguin), a New York bookseller is given an old book by a customer, which it turns out can be used to step from any doorway into any other, anywhere



in the world. Unfortunately, there are some who will stop at nothing to possess it... We said: "An ambitious work that starts slowly and builds into a compelling story. The writing is occasionally clunky, but there are plenty of page-turning moments, and some clever plotting." Finally, Austin Grossman's **FIGHT ME** (★★★½☆, out now, Penguin) centres on a former member of a teen superhero team, now a 40-year-old professor. When the man who gave him his powers turns up dead, he investigates. We said: "Blends the

anything-goes madness of Silver Age comics with emotionally complicated characters... Doesn't always land its satirical punches, but a melancholy tone gives its quieter moments a surprising impact."

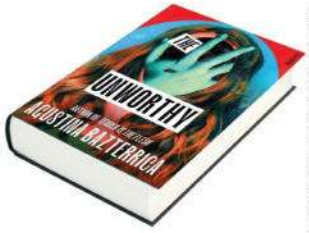
BULLET TIME

A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS

LEGO STAR WARS: THE FORCE OF CREATIVITY

RELEASED 24 APRIL
312 pages | Hardback
Author **Graham E Hancock**
Publisher **Buster Books**

- This deluxe hardback tells the story of the lucrative *Star Wars*/Lego team-up that started with 1999's *The Phantom Menace*.
- No brick is left unturned as it explores the partnership's origins, the evolution of the kits, and the various videogame and TV spin-offs.
- The stunning artwork includes behind-the-scenes photography, concept art and fun oddities, such as an Emperor Palpatine minifig in a Christmas jumper.
- Beyond the trivia, it's a celebration of the creativity required to reimagine *Star Wars* in plastic bricks.
- Interviewees often have memorable job titles, including several "Design Masters" and a "Keeper of the Holocron"!



THE UNWORTHY

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
188 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Agustina Bazterrica**
Publisher **Pushkin Press**

Argentine author Agustina Bazterrica's books are not for the faint-hearted. This post-apocalyptic tale traps readers within a hierarchical community – all-female but for the never-seen "He" at the pyramid's apex – where cruel punishments are a regular occurrence, and about the only pleasure left is seeing them inflicted upon others.

In the House of the Sacred Sisterhood, self-abnegation blurs into self-mutilation. Above the Unworthy are the Chosen – who've had their mouths sewn shut, eardrums perforated, or tongues cut out. Higher still: the Enlightened. Meting out discipline is the whip-wielding Superior Sister.

We learn about this merciless sanctuary from the "ravaged lands" through a wad of pages secretly scribbled by one sister, seeing petty power struggles through her eyes, and learning about her hardscrabble youth. The world-building impresses, and Bazterrica has an often poetic turn of phrase, the sort you pause to savour.

However, nagging questions are left unanswered, and you yearn to break through the barriers confining the narrator. Nowhere is this felt more keenly than in the last entry, which finally penetrates the inner sanctum, recounting events which could fill 20 pages in just one. *The Unworthy* tests the theory that it's good to be left wanting more to the point of frustration. **Ian Berriman**

THE VENGEANCE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 8 MAY
384 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Emma Newman**
Publisher **Solaris**

Having spent her life on pirate ship The Vengeance, Morgane is devastated when her mother, its captain, is killed in an ambush. Even worse: with her final words, Anna-Marie informs Morgane that she was never her mum in the first place; she's her aunt, having stolen Morgane away from her real mother as a baby.

Said mother is now in France, being held prisoner by an evil Comte. With pistols and swords at the ready (Alexandre Dumas would approve), Morgane sets sail across the Atlantic.

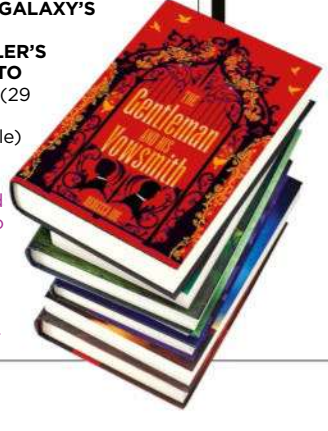
Given that this series is titled The Vampires Of Dumas, and several mentions of Morgane's mother hint that she may not be a nice person, it's not hard to figure out what's going to happen when the long-lost Ma finally shows up. And boy, is it weird reading a book with such a huge spoiler hanging merrily over every page.

Still, it's fun uncovering this bombshell alongside Morgane, who's brilliantly brought to life on these pages – utterly confused by life on land, with all the social faux pas and clueless views of the world you can imagine. Oh, and belching.

Annoyingly, the final chapters are a bit of a mess, with loose ends tied off so abruptly that they inspire whiplash. You probably won't really care though, since this swashbuckling maritime romp has such a merry and adventurous heart. **Jayne Nelson**

ALSO OUT

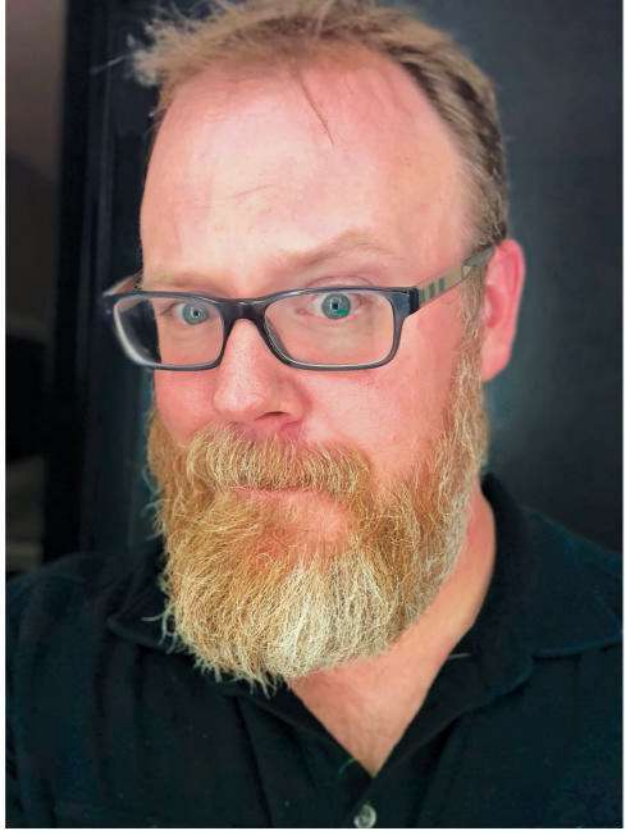
As ever, there are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. In Mizuki Tsujimura's **LOST SOULS MEET UNDER A FULL MOON** (out now, Doubleday) – a million-seller in his native Japan – a go-between arranges reunions between the living and the dead people who changed their lives. Pitched as "*Bridgerton* meets magic and murder", Rebecca Ide's historical fantasy **THE GENTLEMAN AND HIS VOWSMITH** (out now, Tor) sees a Lord about to enter a marriage of convenience locked inside while the contract is hammered out, with both his future bride and an old flame (who's the main negotiator). Awks. Then a dead body turns up... **IRAN + 100** (15 May, Comma Press) collects translations of 10 stories by Iranian authors, all of which imagine their country a century after the 1953 coup (for those not hot on maths, that's the year 2053). A dystopian colony based on the society of bees is the setting for Anna February's YA **THE HIVE** (out now, Chicken House), a murder mystery in which a bodyguard must discover who murdered her charge before she gets executed for it. New entries in continuing series include **THE TAINTED KHAN** (out now, HarperVoyager), Taran Matharu's sequel to *Dragon Rider*, and **THE BOOK THAT HELD HER HEART** (out now, HarperVoyager), the concluding part of Mark Lawrence's The Library Trilogy. Finally, **STAR WARS: GALAXY'S EDGE – TRAVELER'S GUIDE TO BATUU** (29 April, Chronicle) is an official in-world guide to the two Walt Disney World Resorts.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Chuck Wendig

Get a tattoo of his work... it may save you from the shed



© MICHELLE WENDIG

Describe the room in which you typically write.

I have what has been called my "creepy murder shed", but which is actually much nicer than the name suggests. It is, in fact, a shed – the kind of shed we once kept mowers and rakes and motor oil in, but has since been repurposed into a place I go to write every day. Sure, I might have an oubliette underneath and a trap door where I send those who displease me, but I don't know that it deserves to be called a "murder shed".

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk?

Tons! A little crab who holds my pen. A fidgety 3D-printed jackalope. And the cube! The mysterious cube! I have a shiny plastic toy cube I've had for over two decades and it's been around the world with me and a number of other people. The cube is mighty.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while you're writing?

No music for me. It's too weird! I need quiet. I need birdsong. I need the cries of the people trapped beneath my shed.

> **I need the cries of people trapped beneath my shed**

Which of your books are you most proud of?

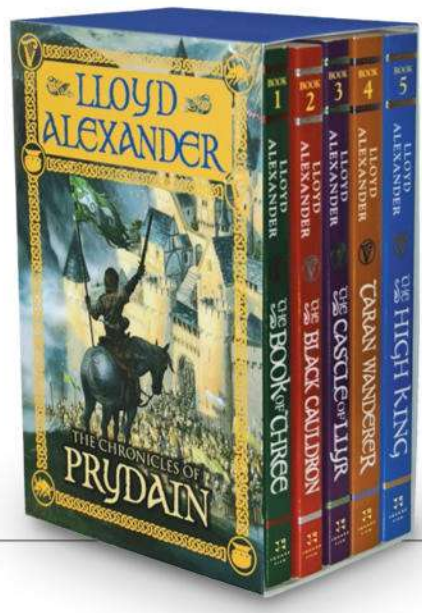
Wanderers. An 800-page peri-apocalyptic sci-fi horror epic. And it was the first book I didn't outline, and somehow it came out... even better than the ones I plotted?

Which of your books was most difficult to write?

The Staircase In The Woods was a tough one – less so to write, more so to edit. The edit was unlike any edit I've had. It's a real Ship of Theseus situation. It's fundamentally the exact same story, same characters, same sequence of events, but at the same time so much of it changed. It's strange to reshape something into roughly the same shape it was while still realising it's entirely different at the same time. And it's what the book needed!

Were you a keen reader as a child?

I was! My favourite was not *The Lord Of The Rings*, but rather The Chronicles Of Prydain by Lloyd Alexander. It stuck with me, and they became books I read to my son, and he loved too.


LLOYD ALEXANDER
THE CHRONICLES OF PRYDAIN
BOOK 1 THE BOOK OF THREE
BOOK 2 THE BLACK CAULDRON
BOOK 3 THE CASTLE OF LLYR
BOOK 4 TARAN WANDERER
BOOK 5 THE HIGH KING

What would be your desert island book?

Swan Song by Robert McCammon. It's over 900 pages of horror masterpiece. Either that or *Finnegans Wake*, just so I can go mad trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

Which SF or fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

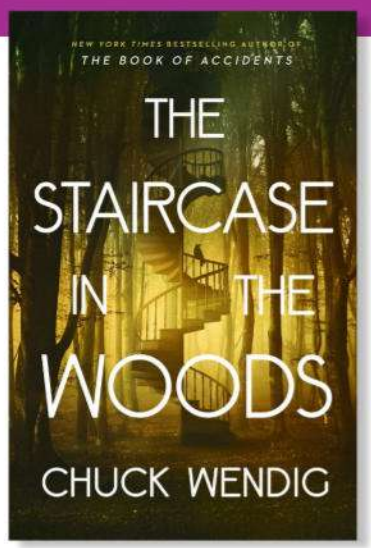
Premee Mohamed's *The Butcher Of The Forest*.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

Someone sent me a YouTube video once where a guy was really mad at one of my books – a *Star Wars* one, natch – and he threw it into a city canal. So I guess that's the weirdest place. A canal.

What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

It's not really a gift *per se*, but any time someone has a tattoo on their body featuring some quote of mine or an image from one of my book covers, I am immensely honoured. You marked your flesh eternally for me. Well, for *you*, but because of me, I guess. That's huge.



The Staircase In The Woods is out on 29 April, published by Del Rey.

ULTIMATE WOLVERINE

From Russia With Claws

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Chris Condon**
- Artists **Alessandro Cappuccio**

ISSUES 1-3 **Marvel's new iteration** of its Ultimate universe may have had some initial stumbles, but it's now in its second year and this darker alternate reality remix of the usual superhero status quo has found its feet. It's also unveiling more new versions of major characters, the latest of which is everybody's favourite unkillable, adamantium-skeletoned Canadian, Wolverine.

This new ongoing series is set in Russia, aka the Eurasian Republic, a territory where mutants have to live under the brutal dictatorship of the "Tsars of Russia and Limbo" Colossus, Magik and Omega Red. A rebel organisation of mutants is fighting back; then the Republic's deadliest weapon is deployed: a brutal, mind-wiped warrior with adamantium claws, known only as the Winter Soldier.

These first three issues are all about set-up, plus as much brutal Wolverine violence as can be delivered, and writer Chris Condon gives the story a downbeat atmosphere and some efficiently nasty shocks.

While *Ultimate X-Men* has been giving the usual mutant mythology a characterful, distinctly manga-esque flavour, *Ultimate Wolverine* feels much more like a traditional X-title, except with the bleakness cranked up a lot higher. Things are doom-laden from the get-go, with most of the focus on the villains, and this new twist on the Winter Soldier story isn't afraid to kill off major X-Men characters.

Both Mystique and Nightcrawler meet gory ends within the first issue, and there's a distinct survival horror vibe to the series that's amped up by Alessandro Cappuccio's gritty artwork. His portrayal of the Russian landscape is brilliantly cold and unforgiving, and he's able to bring an appropriate sense of weight and menace to each of the grisly set-pieces.

The result is a well-focused, no-nonsense superhero thriller that maybe spends a little too long in place-setting mode. It's only at the end of issue three that we get the first clue that a more familiar version of Logan may exist behind all the Winter Soldier mental programming. Up until then, Wolverine is in pure "silent unstoppable nightmare" mode as a character, and while this is undeniably effective, it's a trick that's going to wear out its welcome fast.

> **"All about set-up, plus as much brutal Wolverine violence as can be delivered"**

With issue three also introducing the Ultimate version of Kitty Pryde among the rebels, there's definite potential for some juicy conflict, so hopefully Condon and Cappuccio can build on the foundations they've set up. *Ultimate Wolverine* is in no way radical or revolutionary, but it is looking at one of Marvel's most iconic characters from an interesting new angle. **Saxon Bullock**

i Condon has a new creator-owned series – apocalyptic thriller *News From The Fallout* – coming from Image Comics in June.

METAMORPHO: THE ELEMENT MAN

★★★★★

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Comics**
- Writer **Al Ewing**
- Artist **Steve Lieber**

ISSUES 1-4 **James Gunn's** forthcoming Superman movie is introducing a bunch of less well-known characters from the DC Universe, including Rex Mason, a shape-changer also known as Metamorpho (who'll be played by *Barry* scene-stealer Anthony Carrigan). He's been a low-level Justice League member for decades, and DC's latest revival joyously taps into his fab and groovy '60s roots.

Al Ewing knows that when your hero's superpower is being able to mimic any element with his body, it isn't the time for gritty realism. Instead, this is an unashamedly broad comedy, as Rex tries to balance his tangled love life with the fact that a sinister organisation called CYCLOPS is trying to kill him.

The opening four issues also revive *Metamorpho*'s original (and wildly strange) supporting cast, with characters like madcap billionaire Simon Stagg and Neanderthal manservant Java adding to the mayhem.

Ewing's lively scripts fully embrace the wild camp of '60s Silver Age comics, from the florid narration to the anything-can-happen plot twists, while artist Steve Lieber brings a perfect level of bright, energetic comedy to the visuals.

Breathlessly paced and packed with gags, this is one of the most unashamedly fun superhero titles in years, and a love letter to a gloriously bonkers era in comic-book storytelling. **Saxon Bullock**

THE SEASONS

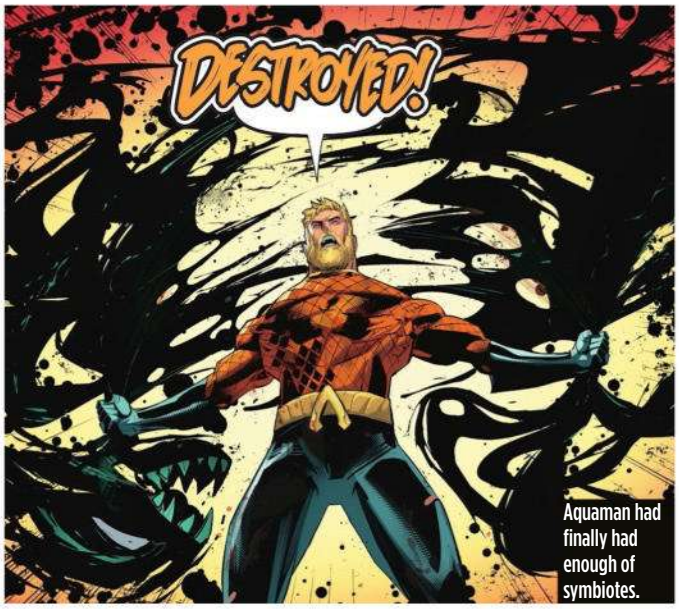
★★★★★

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Rick Remender**
- Artist **Paul Azaceta**

ISSUES 1-3 **Image has billed this** original series from *Deadly Class* creator Rick Remender and artist Paul Azaceta as "an elevated tale of whimsical horror unlike anything ever experienced in comics." That's too bold a claim – if anything *The Seasons* wears its influences on its sleeves – but it's certainly one of the year's most exciting and intriguing new comics.

The title refers to four sisters, the daughters of a renowned detective duo who have vanished in mysterious circumstances. While 14-year-old Spring works as a courier in vibrant New Gaulia, adventurer Autumn is searching for their parents. Along the way she discovers a sinister carnival that leaves devastation in its wake – and which is headed for the city.

The Seasons is set in an alternate 1920s, one where chimney sweeps use jetpacks and Spring rides a moped that also has room for her pet goldfish. But for all the cheerful silliness and outright comedy (skilfully depicted by Remender, Azaceta and colourist Mat Lopes, particularly in issue one's slapstick race through the city) this is an unnervingly strange and often outright menacing comic. *The Seasons* feels like *Something Wicked This Way Comes* as directed by Wes Anderson, or a madcap collision of *The Prisoner* and Tintin, perhaps. It's weird, whimsical, and a complete breath of fresh air. **Will Salmon**



AQUAMAN

The Strife Aquatic

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Comics**
- Writer **Jeremy Adams**
- Artists **John Timms**

ISSUES 1-4 **It often feels as though** DC isn't quite sure what to do with *Aquaman*. Geoff Johns and Ivan Reis's New 52 run made a virtue of this, telling a tale of a hero who had become a punchline getting his mojo back. It's also true that the character won some cool back thanks to Jason Momoa's screen performance. Even so, Arthur Curry hasn't had a solo comic of his own for five years.

This ongoing series changes that. To recap briefly: Darkseid is dead. The result of DC's Biggest Bad's passing has fractured reality in two. On the one side is the Absolute Universe line of comics; on the other the mainline continuity continues, with an Aquaman who is learning to control his strange new powers. When Atlantis – and Arthur's family – vanishes in mysterious circumstances, however, he finds himself transported to a magical otherworld.

> **"Seems to be offering hints at the wider DC cosmology"**

This is folklore-tinged fantasy on a grand scale, with artist John Timms presenting some genuinely striking imagery: Aquaman face-to-face with the vast Lovecraftian monster Dagon, for example, or a bone-covered longship being swept along a river through the stars. The not-so-secret weapon here is colourist Rex Lokus, whose kaleidoscopic work paints the book with every colour of the rainbow.

At the same time, the comic seems to be offering hints at the wider DC cosmology. That may or may not resolve into anything substantial depending on how long the publisher wants this storyline to play out, but no matter. With the new Aquaman you may come for the mystery, but you'll stay for the magic. **Will Salmon**

i Thanks to recent DC events, Aquaman now wields the power of hydrokinesis – the ability to manipulate and control water.

MYTEK THE MIGHTY Volumes One To Four

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **Volumes One And Two OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Bear Alley Books**
- Writer **Tom Tully**
- Artists **Eric Bradbury, Bill Lacey**

COLLECTIONS **The idea of a** giant robot ape becoming sentient was impressively forward-thinking when "Mytek The Mighty" appeared in boys' weekly *Valiant* in 1964.

Tom Tully packs each two-and-a-half-page episode with bombastic scenes of battling mechanical monsters. This attracted criticism at the time for the violence. But not for the dubious attitude to race, apparent from page one with tribesmen the Akari accused of "senseless savagery" by Professor Arnold Boyce. Like square-jawed hero Dirk Mason, Mytek's creator conforms to more positive stereotypes – unlike the opening storyline's villain, fiendish dwarf Gogra.

In this drawn-out tale (taking up all of volume one) Gogra, Boyce's erstwhile assistant, hijacks Mytek and rampages across Africa. Things get more interesting in future volumes as Mytek confronts invading extraterrestrials, a robot Gogra called Gogriath, and has to retrieve his shadow when it escapes him on an alien planet.

Eric Bradbury's atmospheric linework adorns the first two volumes, giving way to Bill Lacey's more dynamic style in three and four. There's much to admire about both artists, who never over-cram the action despite Tully's frequent, dense exposition. **Stephen Jewell**

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Throne Of Blood

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series X/S**
- Publisher **Ubisoft**

VIDEOGAME **Fans have been** gagging for *Assassin's Creed* to visit feudal Japan for years. The genius of this historically set series is its ability to deliver something new each time, whether that's the Italian Renaissance or Caribbean piracy. *Shadows* has been worth the wait: the first to be exclusive to the current generation of consoles, its digital rendition of Sengoku-era Japan is one of the most beautiful open worlds we've seen.

This "warring states period" provides a tumultuous backdrop for a tale of conspiracy that nods to the likes of Akira Kurosawa and Quentin Tarantino with its cinematic language, and *Shogun* with its political intrigue. Play is split between Naoe, an Igan shinobi, and Yasuke, a black samurai who serves warlord Oda Nobunaga. They team up to dethrone the Shinbakufu, the organisation pulling the country's strings, with missions mostly freeform as you hunt down targets.

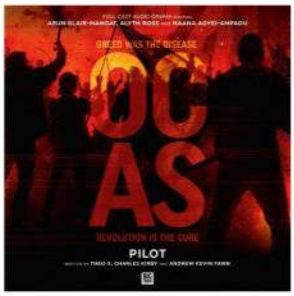
Making both Naoe and Yasuke playable is a clever way to offer stealth *and* combat specialties without making you completely overpowered at all times. About to scrap? Bring in Yasuke with his kanabo club or katana to chop some limbs (it can be gloriously brutal). Sun setting just before you need to steal war plans from a castle? With backflips aplenty and a grappling hook, Naoe is ready to skulk in the shadows. While both protagonists *can* handle most situations, it makes you consider playing to their strengths.

Both are fun to play as, but it's stealth that sees the biggest improvements this time around, giving Naoe the edge – especially for longtime fans of this often-sneaky series. Light and sound are now vital elements of detection, but objects like lanterns can be put out with ranged weapons, and you can go prone to crawl through long grass or shallow ponds.

The castles, temples, and houses ripe for infiltration force you to consider all your tools across maze-like locations with both interiors and exteriors – every sliding door, open window or crawlspace offers an opportunity. While *Shadows*' loose structure means that its ending falls flat, its satisfying stealth loop will keep you coming back. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

ⓘ Yasuke is based on a historical figure, who arrived in Japan in 1579 and was said to have "strength surpassing 10 men".

Why walk softly when Yasuke carries a big stick?



OCAS

★★★☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **52 minutes**
- Format **Download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Stepping beyond** Big Finish's traditional business model, this enigmatically titled audio drama carves out a new world instead of mining an established franchise.

Set in the Britain of the 2050s, it's an intelligent, politically-charged piece that taps current anxieties about capitalism to project a future in which violent revolution has overthrown the one-percenters. In a sly piece of world-building, OCAS stands for Obsessive Capital Accumulation Syndrome, a disorder that explains, if not excuses, the "greedy bloody sods" who ended up against the wall.

The story plays out in pseudo-documentary format as a journalist looks back at the uprising from an apparently utopian present, 20 years later. That lends verisimilitude to the storytelling but also licenses a lot of exposition ("Can you tell the listeners what actually happened next?"). This historical perspective distances us from the revolution, though one character's recollection of a key riot, augmented by crowd noise and the sound of helicopters, is vividly immersive. It makes you wish the entire thing had preserved that ground-level viewpoint.

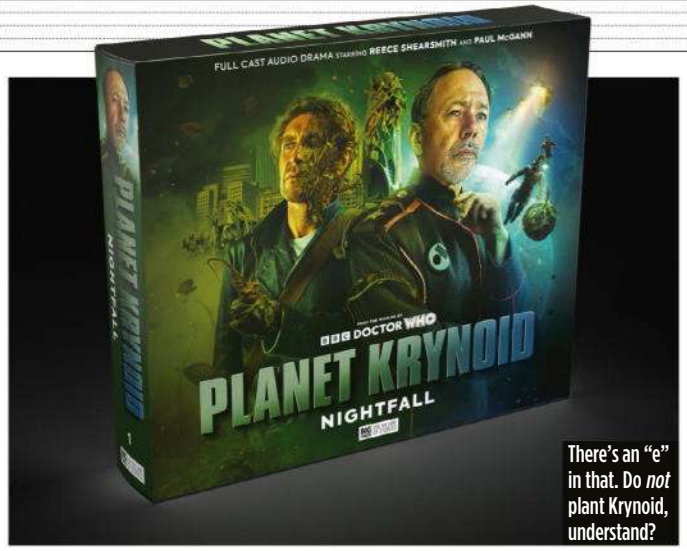
As a social satire it scores obvious points. But as a pilot for a potential series there's promise here, hinting at something more complex, less black and white. **Nick Setchfield**

PLANET KRYNOID: NIGHTFALL

Planting the seeds

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **170 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**



There's an "e" in that. Do *not* plant Krynoid, understand?

AUDIO DRAMA **Krynoids remain** among classic *Doctor Who*'s most memorably menacing monsters. In the voracious killer plants' sole screen appearance to date, 1976's "The Seeds Of Doom", Tom Baker's Doctor refers to the threat they pose as being nothing short of apocalyptic. "On any planet where the Krynoid gets established," he gravely warns, "all animal life is extinguished."

Planet Krynoid is a new series fully exploring what that might look like. Sunlight is an affluent colony on a frozen alien world, run by Governor Robert Hodan (Reece Shearsmith). Hodan's wife is terminally ill, but the discovery of a strange alien pod offers new hope for a potential cure for her condition. When the pod hatches, however, things quickly go to hell. Into this chaos comes Paul McGann's Time Lord, for once not the focus of the story. But even the Doctor cannot win every time...

In the extras accompanying this first three-part box set, producer Jonathan S Powell says that *The Last Of Us*, with its post-cordyceps pandemic world, was an influence. To that you can also add *Alien* (a scene where a character is infected by the parasitic creature, only to seem briefly fine, is pure John Hurt at the dinner table) and (naturally; these are plants) *The Day Of The Triffids*.

> **"It's a familiar tale, but one that's decently well told"**

It's a familiar tale, but one that's decently well told, even if the Doctor's fleeting presence does make him seem rather careless. The series doesn't pull its punches, and by the end of this first set Sunlight's few survivors are facing a very difficult future. Which of course, in post-apocalyptic shows, is the point at which the story really begins. **Will Salmon**

i *Bergerac* creator Robert Banks Stewart devised the Krynoid, but reckoned script editor Robert Holmes named the creature.

ATOMFALL

The Leak District

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, PS4, Xbox Series X/S**
- Publisher **Rebellion Developments**

Cricket may be boring, but this is going a bit too far.

VIDEOGAME **Have you ever wished** for a game that allowed you to eat Cornish pasties to restore your health, drink tea to calm your heart rate, and smack unnatural horrors in the face with a cricket bat? If so, then your wish has come true. An adventure with survival elements and a strong British flavour, *Atomfall* will surprise you in all the right ways.

It imagines a version of the 1957 Windscale nuclear accident that was something very different and much worse, resulting in a quarantine zone in the north of England and some distinctly worrying side effects. Exactly *what* happened and why is unclear, and you'll need to work hard to figure it out. Emerging from a bunker armed with nothing more than a classic case of videogame character amnesia, the world is your contaminated oyster. You're not given a quest, or any waypoints. You need to go out and find notes to read, characters to talk to and places to explore in order to trigger leads to follow.

This might sound intimidating, or like a recipe for frustration, but the open-ended doling out of quests works wonderfully. This is in part down to the comprehensive accessibility options on offer. You can tweak individual elements to make navigating both quests and the world at large easier or harder, as well as to sharpen or soften combat and resource availability.

> **"Science fiction, folk horror and apocalypse tropes blend together"**

As well as looking gorgeous, this little slice of northern England is a pleasure to be in. Science fiction, folk horror and apocalypse tropes are blended together; you'll encounter retro-styled robots, outlaws with questionable fashion sense, monsters, and violent druids. The open world is relatively small but packed with things to find, and the lack of hand-holding means each new discovery is accompanied by a sense of achievement. *Atomfall* offers a unique experience that's consistently gripping, and not easily forgotten. **Luke Kemp**

i Easter eggs to spot include four candles next to fork handles, and a bath on wheels with three skeletons inside...

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

DINOSAURS

Step back in time to the Mesozoic Era, as we test your knowledge of big extinct reptiles in SF and fantasy

Quizmaster ***Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor***

QUESTION 1
What's the name of the island on which Jurassic Park was built?

QUESTION 2
Name the author of the classic 1912 novel *The Lost World*.

QUESTION 3
According to the *Doctor Who* story "Earthshock", what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
What's the title we've removed from this movie poster?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
Which comics artist created Devil Dinosaur, and his ape-like pal Moon-Boy?

QUESTION 6
Who wrote the 1952 short story "A Sound Of Thunder", in which a safari company offers trips back in time to hunt dinosaurs?

QUESTION 7
Which cartoon family had a pet called Dino?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this 1994 horror-comedy.

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
Name the '70s TV show whose theme song begins, "Marshall, Will and Holly/On a routine expedition/Met the greatest earthquake ever known...".

QUESTION 10
Which 1969 film sees cowboys capturing a Tyrannosaurus to put it on display in a rodeo show?

QUESTION 11
What unusual creature (named off-screen as Myfanwy) was Torchwood Three's pet?

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify the movie from this detail of the poster.

QUESTION 13
In *Firefly* (and the spinoff movie *Serenity*), which member of the crew of Serenity had a collection of toy dinosaurs? (We don't need their full name.)

QUESTION 14
Which TV series visited an alternate Earth where dinosaurs still exist, in an episode entitled "In Dino Veritas"?

QUESTION 15
Who or what are Grimlock, Slug, Strafe and Scorn?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify the movie from this detail of the poster.

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 17
Name the dino alternative Spider-Man who made an appearance in *Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*.

QUESTION 18
Name the humanoid species descended from dinosaurs encountered by the crew of the USS Voyager in the Delta Quadrant.

QUESTION 19
The government organisation in *Primeval* which tracks down dinos is called ARC. What does the acronym stand for?

QUESTION 20
In the *Doctor Who* episode "Dinosaurs On A Spaceship", which race created the titular spaceship?

Answers
1 Isla Nublar 2 Arthur Conan Doyle 3 A freighter jumping back in time and crashing 4 *One Million Years BC* 5 Jack Kirby 6 Ray Bradbury 7 The Flintstones 8 *Tammy And The T-Rex* 9 *Land Of The Lost* 10 *The Valley Of Gwangi* 11 A Pterodactyl 12 65 13 Wash (Hoban Washburne) 14 *Sliders* 15 Dinobots 16 *When Dinosaurs Ruled The Earth* 17 Spider-Rex 18 The Voth 19 Anomaly Research Centre 20 The Silurians

How did you do?

Mark yourself by dinosaur size

0-5
Microraptor

6-10
Triceratops

11-15
Tyrannosaurus Rex

16-19
Diplodocus

20
Argentinosaurus

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SFX

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"I could do with an edible"

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NEXT ISSUE

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

HEY DOLL!

M3GAN 2.0

THE BITCH IS BACK

IRONHEART
WAKANDA LIVES ON

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON
RETURN TO BERK

ANDOR
THE END OF AN ERA

SFX 392 ON SALE 21 MAY-GAN

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

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PLUS! SCANS! FOUNTAINS! SPACESHIPS!

The TARDIS Playhouse

Darren Scott, Editor

Déjà vu: the feeling of having experienced something before. Déjà Who: the feeling when the smell of PVC can transport you back in time, and to adventures through the universe. Well, around your garden and bedroom, mainly.

It was the mid-'80s, and I was going through a(nother) phase of *Doctor Who* appreciation, this one likely triggered by having seen the Peter Cushing movies for the first time at a local cinema. For some reason, seeing a new TARDIS interior tripped something in my brain, and voila – I was lugging around a not-particularly-light, solid wood mini-cupboard, decorated with paper outside to look vaguely like a Police Box and a scanner screen and controls inside. Obviously, the windows were all wrong...

My mum and Nana must have seen their slightly effeminate child struggling to lift household furnishings across the backyard, and surprised me one day with an unexpected gift: an officially licensed TARDIS playhouse, manufactured by Dekker Toys. Well, they called it a "tardis". But whatever – I was elated.

A thick plastic cover – on which the Police Box was printed – went over a four-foot-high frame of plastic tubing you assembled. You blew into the light on top to inflate it, then you could pop inside, where a version of the console was printed underneath a blue window.

I *loved* my TARDIS tent. When I wasn't having adventures in the garden, it sat in my bedroom. Heck, I even *slept* inside it on a large cushion, I was that small.

But there inevitably comes a point where you put away childish things – if only for a while. By the time I was reunited with my TARDIS, the frame was gone. We built a new one out of wood. This was 20 years later, but it still looked as good as new – despite the small teeth marks on the right "door" where it had got too close to the gerbil cage decades before.

When I moved home, I had to walk up the street literally inside the TARDIS, due to the wooden frame not being collapsible. When I moved to London she had to live outside in a concrete "garden" due to space. Then following a flood, with her beams rotten and her exterior filthy, she sat on a balcony waiting to see if she could be restored until, one day, she was gone. If, following a gust of wind, a lump of soggy blue PVC landed on your head, I'm sorry.

Whenever I get *that* particular scent of PVC, I'm never far off nipping onto eBay and having one more trip...

Darren's life in plastic was fantastic, even if the console design made him twitch slightly.

The TARDIS Playhouse, in better times.

© DEKKER TOYS. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER HILL.

Fact Attack!

- Dekker is widely known for its *Noddy* toy car – one of many franchises that it had the licence to make toy ranges for.
- The packaging depicts children in costumes for the Fifth Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan (poor Adric), but these were never actually produced.
- Other popular playhouses in the '80s included *He-Man*'s Castle Grayskull, *ThunderCats*' ThunderTank and *The A-Team*'s van.
- The 1990s *Doctor Who* fanzine *Cottage Under Siege* used the term "tardis tent" as gay rhyming slang, meaning "bent".
- There was a playtent for the Eleventh Doctor, produced by H Grossman Ltd. It unfolded to reveal a photo of the console room.

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